

Emilia Petrocelli

# Project-Based Modular Designs in English Language Acquisition

## Bridging Tasks, Structures, and Classroom Realities

Endorsed by Rod Ellis and Rosemary Erlam

Studi e ricerche

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*To Carlo, Clara, Eleyla, Mario, Sciupri, and Sgarlett*



## ENDORSEMENTS

I have enjoyed reading this book immensely. It exemplifies what an applied linguistics approach to language teaching can offer. Drawing on a wide range of research supporting task-based language teaching, the need for explicit language instruction, and the educational value of project-based language teaching, the author makes a strong and lucid case for a modular curriculum that balances task-based and structure-based approaches and thereby caters respectively for implicit and explicit language teaching and learning. She provides very readable accounts of how the modular approach can be implemented in three projects carried out in Italian secondary schools. This book provides the best account yet of how task-based language teaching can be implemented in state schools. It is a must read for anyone interested in learning how the difficulties associated with task-based language teaching can be overcome.

**Rod Ellis**

Curtin University, Australia

There is now an impressive theoretical and research literature supporting Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) as the best approach to helping students develop communicative proficiency in the language they are learning. However, in reality, teachers are often slow to adopt innovations that might mean a substantial shift in practice, not least when these might seem to conflict with assessment and curriculum demands. In this manuscript, Emilia Petrocelli demonstrates how Task-Based Language Teaching can be implemented in the Italian context. Drawing on Ellis's concept of a modular curriculum (2019), she showcases, with examples from real classrooms, how teachers can use tasks to cater to learners' needs to develop both communicative fluency and accuracy. The result is an excellent resource which has wide appeal in terms of audience. It presents a clear and concise rationale for TBLT, of particular value for the applied linguistics researcher and student; for the teacher, it outlines units in which the traditional English language classroom is transformed into a place where students can experiment, play and innovate as they develop language proficiency.

**Rosemary Erlam**

University of Auckland, New Zealand



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## INTRODUCTION. PURPOSE, SCOPE, AND GUIDING QUESTIONS

The guiding open question of this book is a familiar one to both researchers and practitioners in the field of foreign language teaching and learning: *should English language instruction be primarily task-based, developing implicit knowledge through communicative use, or structure-based, ensuring explicit coverage of forms?* This question has sparked scholarly debate for decades. It is also a practical dilemma for teachers working in institutional settings, such as schools, universities, and other contexts where curricular mandates, assessment requirements, and societal expectations often “dictate” what is to be taught. Faced with these constraints, many teachers gravitate towards explicit instruction, not necessarily because they doubt the value of tasks, but because explicit knowledge provides a sense of coverage and security in contexts where accountability is a significant concern.

At the same time, teachers confront the perennial question of sequencing: *which structures should be taught, in what order, and to what end?* Decades of research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and interlanguage studies (Han 2004; Ellis 2008; Ellis *et al.* 2009) have shown that persistent difficulties with forms such as articles, conditionals, or passives cannot be resolved simply by front-loading them into a syllabus. Learners’ developmental trajectories often resist externally imposed sequences, leaving teachers to navigate between the demands of a predetermined syllabus and the realities of acquisition.

This tension has shaped my own trajectory as a teacher and researcher. Having explored and researched task-based language teaching (TBLT), I was deeply committed to meaning-focused pedagogy even before the appearance of Ellis’s modular curriculum proposal in 2019 (and 2024), whose roots go back to Ellis (2003b), where he outlined the core ideas of this approach. His articulation of a modular design felt both clarifying and legitimising: it problematised the very dilemmas that teachers experience in institutional contexts, and it offered a principled rationale for combining task-based and structure-based strands within a single pedagogical framework. In many ways, Ellis’s proposal put into theoretical words what I (and very presumably many other teachers) had long been doing intuitively and, at some level, unconsciously.

Ellis's modular curriculum rests on the assumption that implicit and explicit knowledge arise from distinct psycholinguistic processes and thus require differentiated pedagogical treatment (see also Ortega 2009). It distinguishes between two complementary strands. The task-based strand takes the task as the unit of planning and instruction, aiming to promote implicit knowledge through meaning-focused communication and goal-oriented interaction. This strand takes priority over what could be referred to as the structure-based strand, which plays a supportive role, and includes approaches where language form provides the main organising principle, such as Presentation–Practice–Production (PPP) or Task-Supported Language Teaching (TSLT), both primarily aimed at fostering explicit knowledge of target structures through form-focused practice, consciousness-raising (CR) activities, and grammar work. In the modular approach, the structure-based strand is introduced only when needed, particularly for features that resist incidental acquisition or when learners' developmental readiness makes explicit focus timely. The selection of target forms follows a flexible checklist, allowing for a deliberate yet adaptive choice of structures based on classroom evidence and emerging communicative needs. In this way, the model reconciles usage-based and skill-acquisition perspectives by maintaining the task-based strand as primary, while positioning explicit, structure-focused work as a secondary but strategically important support.

The present volume builds on this proposal by offering a set of classroom-based applications of the modular curriculum, trialled across different educational levels (upper secondary and university) and proficiency ranges (from A2+ to B2). It draws on my own teaching experience, and on subsequent refinements inspired by Ellis's writings. The book builds on Ellis's foundation in two distinctive ways. First, it examines the modular curriculum not in idealised conditions but in the constrained environments of Italian upper-secondary schools, where the tensions between implicit and explicit instruction are most acute. Second, and more importantly, it extends the model through the systematic integration of project work. Each module is designed around a set of activities, some of which are task-based with implicit form-focused instruction (FFI), while others are designed for explicit FFI. All the activities converge on a culminating "macro-task".

Methodologically, the study is grounded in a design-based, task-oriented classroom inquiry, inspired by the principles of Task-Based Language Teaching (Ellis 2003b, 2005), Modular Curriculum (Ellis 2019, 2024) and Form-Focused Instruction (FFI) (Fotos/Nassaji 2007). Rather than pursuing experimental control, the project developed through iterative cycles of design, classroom implementation, and reflection, seeking to capture the ecological reality of teaching and learning in context. In this respect, it aligns with action-oriented and reflective research traditions (Erlam/Tolosa 2022), where theory and practice interact dynamically to generate pedagogical insights and foster professional growth.

The modules are so organised to provide coherence across lessons, sustain learner

motivation, and create a clear sense of purpose, because every task contributes towards an ultimate product. All activities designed within the FFI component, both structure-based and task-based, were conceived to achieve a non-linguistic outcome. This design choice aimed to enhance learners' motivation and engagement (Dörnyei, 1994; Ushioda 2011; Dörnyei/Ushioda 2021) and maintain the communicative drive that underpins the entire project. In other words, even when the pedagogical focus shifted toward explicit form-focused instruction (FFI), the overarching purpose remained communicative and meaning-oriented so that language learning could emerge as a by-product of purposeful interaction rather than as an end in itself.

Moreover, the project-modular design provides natural opportunities for interdisciplinarity. Some of the projects described here were conducted in collaboration with colleagues from other disciplines, illustrating how language learning can serve as a hub for cross-curricular engagement. While the focus of this book remains on language acquisition, the potential for wider educational integration is a significant added value.

The book is situated at the intersection of three main fields. SLA provides the theoretical rationale for valuing tasks and incidental learning, while recognising the supporting role of explicit knowledge (Schmidt 1990; N. Ellis 1996; Long 2015; DeKeyser 1998, 2025; N. Ellis/Wulff 2025). English Language Teaching (ELT) raises awareness of contextual constraints and the indispensable role of teacher agency in mediating between theory and practice (Spada 2013; Loewen/Sato 2018; Erlam/Tolosa 2022). Linguistics offers the descriptive and analytical resources for identifying and sequencing problematic areas of English (e.g., articles, third-person singular -s, conditionals, passives), which decades of interlanguage research have shown to be resistant to incidental acquisition (Han 2004; Ellis 2008; Ellis *et al.* 2009; N. Ellis 2006, 2017, 2018; Perkins/Zhang 2022; Rogers/Yang 2024).

In combining these perspectives, the book does not seek to prescribe a single method. Rather, it advances a principled but pragmatic framework that is research-informed, context-sensitive, and responsive to the realities of contemporary classrooms, whether in environments of English as a Second (ESL), as a Foreign (EFL), or as an Additional Language (EAL). By grounding its proposals in both theory and practice, it aims to reassure teachers that the choice between task-based and structure-based instruction need not be an either/or dilemma, but can instead be resolved within a flexible modular design. Ellis himself has emphasised that task sequencing remains «as much an art as a science» (2019: 469), lacking definitive algorithms and relying instead on teachers' intuition, experience, and sensitivity to learners' needs. The ultimate goal of this work is to document sequences and reflections which may contribute to this ongoing art-science negotiation: providing concrete classroom evidence, highlighting constraints specific to institutional contexts, and showing how a project-based modular approach can make Ellis's modular curriculum both practical and sustainable.

The volume begins with conceptual debates, moves towards methodological framing, and culminates in practical exemplification. In this way, the theoretical, methodological, and empirical strands are interwoven, illustrating not only what modular, project-based pedagogy entails but also how it can be enacted in practice. To guide the reader, Chapters 1, 2, and 3 establish the theoretical foundations of the research. They review the central debates in second language acquisition (SLA), English language teaching (ELT), and English linguistics. By situating the work at the intersection of these fields, the chapters provide the conceptual scaffolding for the empirical and pedagogical exploration that follows. Chapter 4 moves from theory to methodology. It introduces the project-based modular approach, outlining its rationale, the educational contexts in which it was implemented, and the principles of sequencing that govern the alternation between task-based and structure-based phases. This chapter, therefore, acts as a bridge, translating theoretical insights into a pedagogical framework capable of guiding classroom practice. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 present the classroom experimentation through three projects: *The Ad Challenge*, *World Recipes*, and *Superquark*.

The first two projects are predominantly linguistic in orientation, with their primary aim being to foster second language development without embedding disciplinary content, though they remain open to cross-curricular links. By contrast, *Superquark* exemplifies how project-based modular work can be expanded into an interdisciplinary dimension, integrating historical and literary content with linguistic aims. In each case, the projects are analysed step by step, showing how specific structures were targeted, how tasks were sequenced, and how the activities supported language use and reflection as well as learner motivation.

The project shows how modular sequences can simultaneously develop both implicit and explicit knowledge while facilitating content learning. The book then closes with a set of final remarks, which highlight the contributions of the project-based modular approach to the ongoing debate on modular curricula, reflecting on the constraints and affordances of institutional contexts underlining its impact on English teaching and learning practices. It also illustrates how flexible sequencing and teacher mediation can reconcile research principles with the pragmatic realities of classroom practice, contributing to a more context-sensitive model of instructed language learning. Finally some directions for future research and pedagogical innovation are illustrated to pave the way to the development of language instruction as aligned to sociocultural transformations and ultimately to learners' multimodal access to knowledge.

# 1. TASKS, STRUCTURES, AND MODULARITY: RETHINKING ENGLISH LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY

## 1.1 SHIFTING TOWARDS A TASK-BASED/STRUCTURE-BASED MODULAR DESIGN IN THE FRAMEWORK OF PROJECT WORK

The historical evolution of language teaching methodologies provides a crucial backdrop for understanding the current position of task-based and task-supported approaches. The Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) model, which dominated much of the second half of the twentieth century, embodies structure-based pedagogy. Lessons were designed around the explicit presentation of a grammatical feature, followed by controlled practice, and culminating in freer production. Its appeal lay in the apparent simplicity, compatibility with structural syllabuses, and ease of implementation in diverse contexts. However, as numerous SLA scholars have argued (Krashen 1982; Pienemann 1984, 1985; Long 1988), PPP suffers from a fundamental flaw: the assumption that linguistic forms can be taught and acquired in the sequence prescribed by an external syllabus, disregarding the developmental constraints of learners' interlanguages. This often results in students holding explicit knowledge of forms but lacking the ability to deploy them spontaneously in communication.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) emerged in response to these limitations, drawing on SLA research that highlights the roles of input, interaction, and implicit learning (Ellis 2003b; Ellis *et al.* 2009; Long 2015). Instead of centring the lesson around a form, TBLT begins with a task, a communicative activity with a non-linguistic outcome, and treats form as an incidental by-product of meaning-making. Proponents of TBLT argue that it aligns more closely with natural, implicit processes of acquisition; also, as pointed out by Morgana (2023:162), «the discussion on linguistic structures and explicit focus on form activities can be moved to the last part of the TBLT cycle, if needed», highlighting how TBLT's emphasis on communication has often been misconceived as overshadowing its attention to form. Yet, despite its firm theoretical grounding, TBLT has faced challenges in practice. Teachers often report difficulty in implementing it within examination-driven systems, in large classes, or in contexts where students and institutions expect explicit grammar teaching (Erlam

2008; Carless 2009; Littlewood 2014).

The tension between PPP and TBLT reflects deeper epistemological divides, including those between explicit and implicit knowledge, declarative and procedural learning, and synthetic versus analytic syllabuses. Understanding this genealogy clarifies why subsequent approaches, including Task-Supported Language Teaching (TSLT), have sought to find a middle ground between these extremes.

TSLT retains the communicative potential of tasks but situates them within a structure-oriented framework. A lesson typically combines explicit instruction on a linguistic feature with a task designed to elicit its use, and concludes with feedback or reflection. Unlike PPP, TSLT emphasises the communicative integrity of tasks: the “production” stage is not mere freer practice but an authentic activity in which learners attempt to achieve an outcome. In this scenario, Ellis has been particularly influential in clarifying the distinction between TBLT and TSLT (e.g., 2003b, 2019, 2024). At the level of curriculum design, TBLT is based on a task syllabus, while TSLT is based on a structural syllabus. At the level of lesson implementation, TBLT avoids a priori explicit teaching, whereas TSLT incorporates it. In practice, TSLT offers flexibility in contexts where communicative approaches must coexist with structural demands. It also serves as a conceptual bridge, allowing learners to benefit from both explicit knowledge (which may be automatised to some extent) and incidental development fostered through tasks.

Importantly, TSLT should not be confused with PPP. As Ellis (2019) notes, tasks in TSLT are not mere relabelings of drills but opportunities for meaning-focused communication. Support can take the form of pre-task scaffolding, strategic task sequencing, or post-task reflection, rather than relying solely on mechanical practice. In this sense, TSLT represents a pragmatic compromise, acknowledging the constraints of real classrooms while preserving the communicative value of tasks.

Recent contributions by Ellis (2019, 2024) have reshaped the debate by enforcing the concept of a modular curriculum, which seeks to reconcile the theoretical strengths of TBLT with the practical affordances of structure-based instruction. The conceptual roots of this framework can be traced back to Ellis (2003b), where he articulated the basic concepts. Rather than integrating implicit- and explicit-knowledge strands within a single syllabus, Ellis proposes that they be organised as distinct modules. In this way, task-based modules foster implicit knowledge through communicative use, while structural modules target residual or persistent problems via explicit instruction and consciousness-raising (CR) activities.

This modularity stems from three considerations. First, SLA research demonstrates that implicit learning is the default pathway for developing communicative competence. It does not, however, guarantee mastery of all forms: learners often fossilise or develop entrenched non-target-like forms (Han 2004). Second, explicit instruction, while limited in its ability to generate implicit knowledge, can nonetheless create automated explicit knowledge that improves accuracy and supports editing

(DeKeyser 2025). Third, educational contexts impose constraints that cannot be ignored. Teachers may need to prepare learners for grammar-focused examinations, or students may expect a structured sequence of forms.

A modular curriculum allows these realities to coexist without forcing artificial integration. The task-based strand cultivates fluency, interactional competence, and incidental grammar acquisition. The structure-based strand functions as a remedial mechanism for problematic features. In this way, Ellis resolves the impasse between advocates of “pure” TBLT and defenders of traditional syllabuses: both are necessary, but their logic and goals differ.

For pedagogy, the implication is clear: teachers do not have to choose between TBLT and teaching structures. Instead, they can position each emphasis side by side, calibrating emphasis according to learners’ proficiency and contextual constraints. This book supports the idea that the modular perspective is one of the most compelling frameworks for designing language curricula in contemporary society.

While modularity means separating strands at the level of curriculum design, it does not preclude methodological bridges. Among these, project work offers a powerful mechanism for linking fluency and accuracy. Projects, such as designing a TV ad for an invented object, producing a documentary, or creating a menu for a fictional restaurant, embody many of the defining characteristics of tasks. They are outcome-oriented, meaning-focused, and require learners to draw on linguistic and non-linguistic resources collaboratively. At the same time, their extended scope allows teachers to embed targeted structural support strategically. A project involving interviews might naturally prompt work on question formation, while a project centred on storytelling may naturally lead to the use of narrative tenses or discourse markers.

In this book, project work occupies a central place as the “malga”, the shared space where TBLT and structure-based approaches (as PPP and TSLT) come together without collapsing into one. Within projects, teachers can scaffold accuracy by drawing on structural checklists or focused tasks while ensuring that the emphasis remains on authentic communication. This dual function reflects Brumfit’s (1984, 1985) early insight that curricula must balance accuracy and fluency. Still, it achieves this balance through modularity rather than full integration, and within the procedural framework of project work, an idea also anticipated in Brumfit’s conception of communicative methodology, which inspired the project design in this study.

Project work also aligns with broader educational goals such as interdisciplinarity, creativity, and learner autonomy. It situates language learning within meaningful content domains, bridging linguistic objectives with disciplinary knowledge. Moreover, projects encourage reflection and evaluation, fostering metacognitive awareness of both communicative effectiveness and linguistic accuracy. A volume closely aligned with the approach of this book is Della Putta and Sordella’s (2022),

which draws on a TBLT framework within the Italian school context, with a strong focus on experiential and project-based learning. The authors highlight learner agency and the formative value of tasks as real communicative experiences that connect language learning with classroom practice.

In short, project work preserves the modular distinction while offering a practical bridge. It situates explicit instruction within a communicative enterprise and infuses communicative tasks with structural awareness. In this sense, projects illustrate the flexible realisation of modularity in classroom practice.

What follows is a brief excursus outlining the main features of PPP, TBLT, and TSLT, which serve to frame the rationale for a modular approach. By revisiting these pedagogical models in sequence, the discussion gradually leads toward the idea of modularity as a principled way of reconciling structure-based and task-based instruction.

## 1.2 THE PRESENTATION-PRACTICE-PRODUCTION (PPP) MODEL

The Presentation-Practice-Production model long represented the dominant paradigm in language pedagogy, particularly in ELT in the latter half of the twentieth century. Rooted in the legacy of the Audiolingual Method and behaviourist learning theories, PPP offered a structured and teacher-led approach to the introduction and consolidation of grammatical features. In its canonical form, a PPP lesson proceeds through three phases. First, the teacher presents a new item, through explanation, modelling, or exemplification. Second, learners practise the item in controlled or semi-controlled activities, often drills or substitution exercises. Third, learners attempt to produce the item in freer communicative activities.

PPP gained wide acceptance because it provided clarity and systematicity. It gave teachers a reliable script, met institutional demands for lessons with measurable objectives, and aligned with learners' expectations of explicit grammar instruction. Nevertheless, the model has faced sustained criticism in theoretical and empirical SLA research. A central objection concerns the mismatch between linear sequencing of items in PPP syllabuses and the developmental processes that govern interlanguage acquisition. Research on developmental sequences and the Teachability Hypothesis demonstrates that learners do not acquire grammatical features simply because they are taught. Acquisition follows an internally constrained route, which places limits on what instruction can achieve at a given time (Pienemann 1984, 1985; Ellis 2008). The assumption that presenting, practising, and producing a structure will lead to acquisition is therefore untenable.

A second issue relates to the nature of the knowledge created by PPP lessons. According to skill-acquisition theory (DeKeyser 1998, 2000, 2025), instruction may lead to automatised explicit knowledge that supports controlled performance but does not equate to the implicit knowledge underpinning spontaneous use. In contrast, TBLT is grounded in a weak interface position (Ellis, 2005), where explicit

knowledge can facilitate noticing and thereby promote conditions for implicit learning. Implicit knowledge remains central to long-term acquisition and cannot be achieved by automatised explicit routines, even if such routines can be useful in constrained contexts (e.g., Ellis *et al.* 2009; Long 2015).

Despite its limitations, PPP persists in many educational contexts. Institutional requirements, high-stakes testing environments, and stakeholder expectations sustain its use. Its predictability and ease of implementation continue to make it attractive. PPP also provides a reference point against which later approaches such as TSLT and TBLT have been defined. From a modular perspective, PPP represents one possible realisation of structure-based teaching that can be used selectively to address persistent problems, provided that its limitations are acknowledged.

### 1.3 TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING (TBLT)

Task-Based Language Teaching emerged as both a critique of and an alternative to structure-based approaches. It is informed by usage-based theories of language learning and by interactionist accounts of SLA that emphasise the role of input, output, and negotiation of meaning (Long 1996; Gass 1997; Mackey 1999; N. Ellis 2003; Bybee 2006). TBLT places communicative tasks at the centre of the curriculum on the assumption that acquisition occurs primarily incidentally through meaning-focused interaction rather than through the sequential teaching of forms (Long 1985, 2015; Ellis 2003a, 2003b, 2024). Learners engage in meaningful activity first and draw on their existing resources. Opportunities to attend to form arise naturally during or after performance.

A long-standing issue in the development of TBLT is the definition of a task. The literature offers complementary perspectives. Long (1985) foregrounded real-world orientation as the hundred and one things people do in everyday life. Willis (1996) emphasised communicative purpose and outcome. Skehan (1996, 1998) proposed criteria such as meaning being primary, the presence of a goal, and relation to real-world communication. Widdowson (2003) criticised the indeterminacy of meaning in some formulations. Samuda/Bygate (2008) described tasks as holistic activities with non-linguistic outcomes. To resolve ambiguities, Ellis (e.g., 2003b) offered an operational definition with four criteria:

- 1) The primary focus is on meaning.
- 2) The task includes a gap, informational, reasoning, or opinion-based, that requires communication.
- 3) Learners rely mainly on their own linguistic and non-linguistic resources.
- 4) The outcome is non-linguistic, and defined in practical and communicative terms rather than in terms of accuracy in predetermined forms.

Ellis (2003b) also distinguished between the *task-as-workplan* (the activity as designed by the teacher or the materials writer) and the *task-as-process* (the way the

activity actually unfolds in classroom interaction). He emphasised that definitions of “task” primarily apply to the work plan, whereas classroom performance is inevitably more unpredictable.

Task-based instruction is closely connected with the broader debate on the interface between explicit and implicit knowledge. Three main positions are generally recognised: the non-interface hypothesis (Krashen 1982), which claims that explicit knowledge cannot become implicit; the strong interface hypothesis (DeKeyser 1998), which views proceduralisation through practice as the main route from explicit to implicit knowledge; and the weak interface hypothesis (see Ellis 2005), according to which explicit knowledge can facilitate noticing and guide attention, thereby supporting the development of implicit competence under communicative conditions. It is this latter view that underpins Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), where meaning-focused interaction provides the conditions for implicit learning, while consciousness and explicit instruction play a supportive role.

In addition, Ellis (e.g., 2005) offered the most systematic account of TBLT, formulating ten core principles of instructed language learning, which situate task-based instruction firmly within SLA theory. These include the need to ensure that learners develop both formulaic and rule-based competence (Principle 1); to focus predominantly on meaning while also creating space for focus on form (Principles 2–3); to prioritise the development of implicit knowledge without neglecting explicit knowledge (Principle 4); and to respect the learner’s built-in syllabus, recognising that acquisition proceeds in predictable developmental sequences (Principle 5). Successful instruction also requires rich input (Principle 6), opportunities for output (Principle 7), and interaction (Principle 8), while being sensitive to individual differences (Principle 9) and assessing both controlled and free production (Principle 10).

All in all, a substantial body of empirical evidence supports TBLT. Classroom studies and meta-analyses indicate that task-based instruction can promote fluency, complexity, interactional competence, and aspects of implicit knowledge (Norris/Ortega 2000; Van den Branden 2006; Shintani 2016; for a review see Long 2015, pp. 341–366). Learners engaged in tasks work through negotiation of meaning and collaborative problem-solving. TBLT also aligns with evidence that explicit instruction cannot override developmental sequences and that implicit learning plays a fundamental role in long-term acquisition (Ellis 2008).

TBLT has faced criticism in both theory and practice. Some scholars have questioned the strong versions of the approach, arguing that its reliance on the Noticing and Teachability Hypotheses (Schmidt 1990, 2001) is under-evidenced and that an exclusive focus on meaning may promote fluency at the expense of accuracy with non-salient features such as articles or inflections (e.g., Sheen 1994; Swan 2005). These authors do not reject communicative or task-based approaches *per se*, but call for a more balanced integration of FFI. Pienemann (1984, 1985, 1989), by contrast, advances a processing-based critique. He questions the assumption that teachability

can be explained solely in terms of input and noticing, arguing that instructional effectiveness is constrained by learners' internal developmental readiness. A further line of criticism targets the coherence of task as a curricular construct: Seedhouse (1999, 2005) doubts that task provides a sufficiently robust organising principle for a language-teaching programme, while Widdowson (2003) contends that prevailing task definitions are overly permissive and that TBLT unduly privileges authentic language use (see Ellis 2009a: 222).

As for teachers, some report difficulties designing and implementing tasks, particularly in large classes and exam-driven contexts, and learners familiar with teacher-centred instruction may view tasks as unfocused or misaligned with assessments (Hu 2013; Littlewood 2014; Erlam 2008, 2015, 2016). These challenges have stimulated attempts to reconcile communicative priorities with the practical need for explicit instruction, which sets the stage for Task-Supported Language Teaching.

#### 1.4 TASK-SUPPORTED LANGUAGE TEACHING (TSLT)

The idea of Task-Supported Language Teaching (TSLT) emerged from Ellis's (2003b) account of weak versus strong versions of task-based teaching, where tasks support rather than determine the syllabus. Ellis systematises the contrast with TBLT, characterising TSLT as the incorporation of tasks within a structurally organised, often PPP-oriented, syllabus, while reserving TBLT for designs in which tasks provide the primary organising principle (Ellis 2009a). In this sense, TSLT seeks to preserve the interactional benefits of task work while creating principled space for planned, explicit attention to form. Crucially, it also allows form-focused episodes to be aligned with learners' developmental readiness, consistent with the constraints highlighted by the Teachability Hypothesis (Pienemann 1984, 1989).

TSLT is best conceptualised as an approach that retains a structural syllabus but employs tasks as methodological vehicles for practice and application. It preserves explicit instruction and attention to accuracy from structure-based teaching and integrates communicative tasks to promote more authentic use. The key distinction between PPP and TSLT lies in how open production functions. In PPP, communicative activities are often limited to the final stage and are tightly bound to the target structure. In TSLT, tasks are central methodological devices that provide meaningful contexts for learners to use the language. They are designed to elicit predetermined linguistic features.

The theoretical rationale for TSLT draws on skill-acquisition theory. Learning begins with declarative knowledge provided by explicit instruction, which is then proceduralised through practice and can be automatised through repeated communicative use. Tasks provide the practice ground where declarative knowledge becomes usable in performance. Although the resulting knowledge remains explicit

in origin, it can achieve a degree of automaticity that makes it functionally equivalent to implicit knowledge in many communicative conditions (DeKeyser 1998, 2007, 2025).

Research evidence offers partial support for the TSLT model. As for English Language Acquisition, studies have shown that learners can achieve gains in grammatical accuracy through task-supported instruction, especially for relatively simple and salient structures such as plural -s or basic word order (Norris/Ortega 2000). Recent evidence confirms that task-supported approaches can yield significant motivational and linguistic benefits, particularly when combined with procedural task repetition, that is, the reiteration of comparable communicative tasks under slightly altered conditions. Studies have shown that such repetition enhances learners' confidence, attentional focus, and fluency while allowing form–function mappings to consolidate gradually (Zúñiga/Payant 2021; Ellis/Li/Zhu 2016). In classroom-based investigations, task-supported instruction has also been found to foster self-esteem, creativity, and engagement by balancing explicit guidance with meaningful communicative use (Souzandehfar/Abdel-Al Ibrahim, 2023). Aramaki (2025) argues that in low-exposure contexts, TSLT with procedural task repetition (PTR) can sustain learners' engagement more effectively than TBLT or traditional methods by managing cognitive demands and supporting learners' psychological needs. Collectively, these findings support the view that task-supported teaching, when sequenced through iterative, scaffolded practice, can provide both affective and acquisitional payoffs, aligning well with the weak-interface perspective that underlies contemporary task-based pedagogy.

However, the efficacy of TSLT with more complex and less salient features, such as articles, conditionals, or subject–verb inversion, is more contested. Yalçın and Spada (2016) found, for example, that only learners with high grammatical inferencing ability benefited significantly from explicit instruction on complex forms, raising questions about the generalisability of TSLT across learner populations. More recently, Spada (2022) observed that, while task-based instruction effectively promotes communicative competence, its impact on morphosyntactically intricate or low-salience forms remains uncertain. She argued that the timing and degree of explicit form-focused intervention are critical mediating factors in determining whether such features are successfully integrated into learners' interlanguage systems.

A further issue concerns the interaction between explicit instruction and task performance. Some studies (Mochizuki/Ortega 2008) have supported the idea that pre-task explicit instruction can increase accuracy in the targeted structure, sometimes without detriment to fluency or complexity. Recent findings indicate that explicit instruction, when strategically timed, can complement rather than conflict with task performance. Michaud and Ammar (2023) have shown that post-task form-focused explanations reinforce noticing and consolidate both implicit and explicit knowledge, particularly when they address linguistic difficulties that have naturally

emerged during task execution. Other research, however, has suggested that explicit pre-task instruction may distort learners' focus during tasks, leading to less natural communicative engagement (see Ellis 2019, Skehan 1998). The balance between structural focus and communicative authenticity, therefore, remains a central tension in TSLT.

Notwithstanding these challenges, TSLT has been praised for its pedagogical adaptability. It acknowledges the importance of explicit instruction in many contexts and accommodates the communicative turn. It also provides a pragmatic option where training, institutional support, or materials for a task-based programme are limited. For these reasons, Littlewood (2014) and others view TSLT as a workable middle ground.

Ellis (2003b, 2019; 2024) has emphasised that TSLT and PPP should not be conflated. PPP typically involves discrete-point practice before freer production. TSLT may bypass the practice stage and transition directly from explicit presentation to the performance of a focused task. The approach is more communicatively oriented than PPP yet remains distinct from TBLT because it retains a structural syllabus and a planned focus on preselected forms.

## 1.5 WHY STRUCTURE-BASED APPROACHES STILL MATTER

Despite sustained critiques, structure-based approaches remain a significant presence in contemporary pedagogy. Their persistence stems not only from tradition but also from practical considerations within educational contexts. As Ellis (2019, 2024) argues, structure-based instruction fosters the development of explicit knowledge, which in turn can play a complementary role in language acquisition. Explicit knowledge facilitates noticing, self-monitoring, and editing during production, while also providing learners with a sense of control and predictability. Moreover, it resonates with long-established conceptions of what language learning entails in many educational cultures (Brumfit 1984; Littlewood 2014). For forms that are complex, non-salient, susceptible to stabilisation or at risk of fossilisation, explicit instruction may be indispensable (Yalçın/Spada 2016; Spada 2022). A curriculum organised only around tasks can develop communicative ability, yet it may leave entrenched errors and limited grammatical accuracy if attention to persistent problems is never targeted.

The concept of “support” in TSLT deserves careful treatment, because it may be misread as placing tasks in a subordinate role at the end of a traditional sequence. That interpretation reduces tasks to decorative activities. A more accurate view recognises that tasks can serve multiple functions. They offer conditions for proceduralising explicit knowledge by requiring learners to use forms in communicative contexts. They also motivate participation. Compared to drills, tasks invite problem-solving, collaboration, and meaning-focused exchange that resemble real communication

(Samuda/Bygate 2008). Support is therefore not secondary. It is a mechanism that connects explicit instruction with communicative competence.

The contrast with TBLT remains fundamental. In TSLT, tasks are linked to explicit instruction and remain tied to a structural syllabus. In TBLT, tasks are the syllabus and are not adjuncts to prior teaching. These differences reflect distinct theories of learning. TSLT sits within a skill-acquisition perspective (DeKeyser 2025). TBLT is aligned with usage-based and interaction-driven accounts (Tomasello 2003; Long 2015).

By situating PPP and TSLT within a broader framework of Structure-Based Language Teaching, it becomes possible to account for their shared reliance on structural syllabuses and explicit instruction while recognising essential differences. PPP represents a more tightly controlled version that foregrounds sequential teaching of discrete items through presentation, practice, and production. TSLT aligns structural instruction with communicative guidance by using tasks as vehicles for practice of predetermined forms and sits closer to TBLT without sharing its curriculum framework. Both approaches target accuracy and rely on explicit knowledge. Both remain form-focused in orientation. This is in line with the approach proposed by Pizziconi (2024), aptly titled “How to Do Things with Grammar”, according to which the concept of grammar extends beyond syntax to encompass all levels of linguistic analysis, from phonetics to pragmatics. This implies that any metalinguistic reflection must begin with a communicative situation in which factors such as the interlocutors and their social faces, the context, the mode of communication, and the communicative goals determine the selection of specific forms from a wide range of paradigmatic options.

From a curricular standpoint, the question is not whether to abandon structure-based teaching but how best to position it within a broader framework. Over recent decades, scholars have tried to reconcile tensions between accuracy and fluency, explicit and implicit learning, and structure and use. Their cumulative contributions converge in the modular perspective. The task-based strand is primary for developing fluent use through meaning-focused activity. The structure-based strand is reactive and selective, and addresses persistent problems through explicit attention. Project work functions as a bridge between these strands. It allows teachers to embed focused structural work within a purposeful communicative enterprise and helps learners integrate accuracy with real-world communication.

## 1.6 FROM COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING TO MODULARITY

The emergence of the modular perspective in language pedagogy can only be understood against the backdrop of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT, see Larsen-Freeman 2000) and the debates it stimulated about syllabus design and methodological priorities.

In the 1970s, structural syllabuses, generally described as synthetic (Wilkins 1976; White 1988), dominated language education by pre-selecting discrete grammatical items to be taught sequentially, with the expectation that learners would later assemble them into communicative proficiency. The communicative turn, grounded in the concepts of communicative competence (Hymes 1971) and the functional view of language (Halliday 1973), challenged this paradigm through the notional-functional syllabus, promoted by Brumfit (1984) and others as a way to prioritise meaning-making over the manipulation of linguistic forms (Widdowson 1990). Yet, as Ellis 2019 observed, both structural and notional syllabuses remained Type A syllabuses (White 1988), being more concerned with specifying content than facilitating learning processes.

The distinction between accuracy and fluency further sharpened the debate (see Housen/Kuiken 2009). Brumfit (1984) proposed a proportional syllabus that balanced product-based approaches, oriented towards accuracy and language-as-usage, with process-based approaches, oriented towards fluency and language-as-use, arguing that neither pole was sufficient in isolation. This insight foreshadowed later modular perspectives by recognising the need for a shifting balance across developmental stages.

From the 1990s onwards, TBLT gained prominence. Long (1985, 2015), Skehan (1998) and Ellis (2003b, 2009a) framed tasks as the organising units of an analytic (Type B) syllabus informed by SLA research. While TBLT marked a decisive move away from structural syllabuses, it was not without controversy. As mentioned before, critics (e.g., Sheen 1994; Swan 2005) questioned its empirical robustness and feasibility, while Littlewood (2014) pointed to systemic barriers, including large classes, limited teacher training, and exam systems aligned with structural syllabuses. As a result, the strong version of TBLT was perceived as idealistic in many contexts.

These challenges prompted proposals for more flexible models. Spada (1997) argued for integrating communicative and form-focused elements, while Ellis (1993) redefined the structural syllabus as a tool for CR rather than as the foundation of instruction, thereby supporting the development of explicit knowledge alongside communicative practice. In this light, Brumfit's 1984 (and 1985) proportional vision resurfaced as a way of sequencing accuracy and fluency.

Building on these insights, Ellis (2019, 2024) systematised the modular curriculum model, which acknowledges the theoretical incompatibility of TBLT and structure-based approaches but treats them as complementary at the curriculum level. PPP and TSLT cannot substitute for TBLT as the foundation of a communicative curriculum, yet they retain pedagogical value as a structural strand that supplements task-based learning. The primacy remains with TBLT, which fosters the incidental development of implicit knowledge through meaning-centred tasks.

This modular synthesis has several advantages. It reconciles the theoretical strength of TBLT, grounded in SLA research, with the practical demands of classrooms

where explicit instruction is expected. It also provides flexibility across contexts. In exam-driven environments, the structural component can be emphasised, while in communicative or immersion programmes, the task-based strand can take precedence. Crucially, it offers a principled alternative to eclecticism. Instead of blending methods haphazardly, modularity maintains the theoretical coherence of both approaches while allowing them to complement each other.

The historical significance of modularity lies in this reframing. Rather than collapsing communicative and structural traditions into a single method, modularity respects their differences while situating them within a coherent curricular architecture. In this way, it represents the culmination of decades of debate, offering a flexible and research-informed framework that preserves the benefits of both.

In sum, the modular curriculum represents not simply another methodological option but a reframing of long-standing debates between structural and communicative traditions. By acknowledging the limits and affordances of both, it offers a principled and flexible architecture that situates tasks at the core of language learning while retaining a structural strand to address accuracy and persistent difficulties. In doing so, it provides teachers with a framework that is theoretically grounded, pedagogically adaptable, and historically responsive to the evolution of language teaching.

The following chapter will outline the structure of the modular curriculum itself, explore its potential challenges, and illustrate how project work can serve as a pedagogical habitat in which modularity finds its most tangible realisation, before considering its convergences and divergences with CLIL, when engaging with disciplinary content.

## 2. EXPLORING MODULARITY AND PROJECT WORK IN CURRICULUM DESIGN

### 2.1 THE MODULAR CURRICULUM

Rod Ellis (2019, 2024) has presented the modular curriculum as a principled way to reconcile the strengths and limitations of TBLT and Structure-Based Language Teaching (SBLT), which includes PPP and TSLT. The approach does not blend them into an eclectic whole but keeps them as separate strands that complement each other. At its core lies the recognition that implicit and explicit knowledge follow different psycholinguistic pathways and therefore require distinct pedagogical treatments.

TBLT is positioned as the primary strand, responsible for fostering implicit knowledge through meaning-focused communication. SBLT functions as a secondary strand, providing explicit knowledge and addressing persistent linguistic difficulties. While explicit competence is not central to communicative performance, Ellis stresses that it can support acquisition indirectly: it helps learners notice features in the input, compare them with their interlanguage, and monitor their output in ways that create opportunities for further development. This position, associated with the weak-interface hypothesis, acknowledges that explicit knowledge rarely converts directly into implicit competence but still plays a vital supporting role.

On this basis, the structural strand is conceived not as a full structural syllabus but as a diagnostic checklist of features that resist incidental acquisition because of L1 transfer, fossilisation, and low salience in an instructed context, thus compensating for the limited amount of extensive input available to learners. These include morphological forms such as tense and agreement markers, functional elements such as articles and modals, syntactic structures like passives or conditionals, and discourse-related phenomena such as marked word order or discourse markers. The strand's role is not to impose a predetermined sequence but to provide focused support when recurrent problems emerge in task performance.

A further question concerns how to sequence the two strands. Ellis (2019) describes three possible models. A parallel model runs them side by side from the beginning, but this may present forms before learners are developmentally ready. A

structure-first model delays task work until after explicit instruction, which aligns with classroom expectations but risks postponing meaningful communication. The task-first model, which Ellis advocates, gives initial priority to tasks, with structural modules introduced once learners have sufficient lexical resources and developmental readiness. This approach aligns with SLA research on developmental sequences and allows structural work to function as a remedial mechanism at later stages.

Syllabus design also differs across the two strands. The task-based syllabus consists of pedagogic tasks selected and sequenced on principles of authenticity, engagement, and complexity, informed by frameworks such as Prabhu (1987) and Robinson (2011) but also by teacher judgement. The structural strand, however, follows no fixed syllabus. Instead, it operates as a reactive instrument: teachers observe learners' performance in tasks, identify persistent difficulties, and address them through short CR activities or targeted instruction.

The modular curriculum thus rests on three principles. Tasks have primacy, as they create conditions for implicit learning and form the core of instructed SLA. Structural modules play a supportive and reactive role, addressing fossilisation and accuracy without replacing the task-based strand. The two strands remain distinct rather than artificially integrated, in recognition of their different learning mechanisms. In this way, the modular curriculum avoids eclecticism while providing a framework that is both theoretically coherent and pedagogically adaptable.

## 2.2 CHALLENGES WITH MODULARITY

Ellis's proposal has sparked constructive debate among scholars who question its theoretical and practical implications because, although the modular curriculum offers a principled way to reconcile structure-based and task-based approaches, its implementation is not without challenges (see Ellis 202 in response to some issues of the debate). One risk, for example, is compartmentalisation: if the strands are kept entirely separate, learners may fail to connect explicit instruction with communicative use. Martin East (2024) has approached the issue from a teacher-education perspective, arguing that the distinction between TBLT and TSLT, though conceptually valuable, becomes less clear in classroom practice. Drawing on his experience with language teachers in New Zealand, East highlights the need for flexible frameworks that account for teachers' pedagogical realities and institutional constraints, suggesting that Ellis's modular separation may be difficult to operationalise consistently. Gavin Bui (2024) provides a more explicitly critical response, questioning the theoretical rationale behind Ellis's claim that TSLT is required to address fossilised errors through explicit instruction. Bui contends that TBLT's own focus on form and post-task phases can achieve similar outcomes without fragmenting the curriculum, and he raises concerns about the assessment coherence and pedagogical manageability of a dual model. A complementary critique comes from Jason Anderson (2020a, 2020b), whose "TATE

model” proposes an integrated alternative that reconciles meaning-focused tasks with both implicit and explicit learning processes. Anderson argues that Ellis’s framework underplays the role of lexis and skill integration, advocating instead for a more fluid continuum that reflects how global coursebooks and classroom practices already blend task-supported and task-based approaches.

Together, these perspectives illustrate an emerging consensus: while Ellis’s modular curriculum provides valuable conceptual clarity, its practical implementation and theoretical separation of TBLT and TSLT remain open to challenge and call for further empirical scrutiny. The present volume takes up this challenge by exploring how a modular approach can, in fact, be implemented, particularly when embedded within project-based frameworks. By integrating modular sequencing with project work, this research aims to demonstrate that such a curriculum can reconcile communicative authenticity with structured pedagogical support, offering a realistic and principled pathway for classroom practice.

One certain challenge for the implementation of the modular curriculum concerns teacher preparation. In examination-driven systems, teachers accustomed to structure-based methods may find it difficult to design and manage authentic tasks, while those committed to communicative practice may underestimate the remedial value of explicit instruction (Erlam 2016). Classroom-based research has shown that many teachers remain uncertain about what genuinely constitutes a task and, under exam pressure, tend to revert to situational grammar activities. In these circumstances, “tasks” are often repurposed as end-of-lesson practice for pre-taught forms rather than as meaning-focused, outcome-oriented work (Erlam 2015). When core task criteria (primary focus on meaning, goal orientation, and learner choice of linguistic resources) are weakened, the pedagogic rationale that supports the development of interactional competence and implicit knowledge seems to be effectively undermined.

Teachers have consistently reported tensions between task-based pedagogy, assessment demands, and syllabus coverage. As Erlam (2014) notes, model modules and ready-to-use materials can help mediate these tensions by operationalising task criteria while showing that curricular coverage can be maintained within a modular framework, thus fostering teacher confidence and uptake. In contexts where schools have introduced reflective cycles involving classroom observation, peer feedback, and progressive goal-setting, practice has tended to shift towards more task-supported lessons. Without such evaluative scaffolding, however, innovation frequently reverts to familiar PPP routines (Erlam 2016). School-based case studies further illustrate workable designs for modular curricula that integrate focused tasks within structured syllabuses, supported by explicit pre- and post-task phases, shared task banks, and collaborative planning mechanisms, all of which make large-scale implementation more feasible (Erlam/Tolosa 2022). Taken together, these findings suggest that, in the absence of targeted training and institutional support, modularity risks collapsing

either into traditional PPP or into an impractical version of pure TBLT.

Finally, institutional and cultural expectations shape the feasibility of modularity. As Littlewood (2014) shows, traditions of teacher-centred instruction may resist task-based methods, whereas in immersion or bilingual settings structural sequencing alone often proves insufficient. Flexibility is therefore both the strength and the vulnerability of modularity: it can adapt to different contexts, but only if the balance between fluency and accuracy is carefully maintained.

These tensions explain why I view project work as a particularly promising context. Projects offer a way of bringing the strands together without blurring their identity, allowing space for authentic communication while embedding targeted structural support. In this sense, they provide a concrete pedagogical habitat for modularity in practice.

### 2.3 PROJECT WORK AS A PEDAGOGICAL HABITAT FOR THE MODULAR CURRICULUM

One promising way to address the challenges posed by the coexistence of the structural strand and the task-based strand within a modular curriculum is through project work. Project work aligns naturally with the principles of experiential learning and constructivist theory, providing opportunities for learners to engage with language in sustained and meaningful ways (Beckett/Miller 2006; Stoller/Myers 2019). It integrates multiple skills, encourages collaboration, and promotes sustained engagement with purposeful content. Typically extending over several lessons and culminating in a tangible product or performance, project work establishes an overarching communicative goal that links smaller tasks into a coherent sequence. Building on Brumfit's (1984, 1985) view of project work as a communicative framework balancing fluency and accuracy, later scholars (e.g. Stoller 2006; Beckett/Slater 2005; Fried-Booth 2002) have further developed project-based approaches as ways of integrating language, content, and collaboration within meaning-focused pedagogy. The underlying philosophy can be traced back to Dewey's (1938) concept of experiential learning, which holds that genuine understanding grows from purposeful activity, reflection, and social interaction. Dewey's principle of learning by doing laid the foundation for learner-centred and inquiry-oriented education, later reflected in communicative and task-based methodologies. From this perspective, project work represents a Deweyan synthesis of thought and action: learners construct knowledge through meaningful engagement with tasks that connect language use, experience, and reflection.

In project work, the task-based strand remains primary, driving communication, motivation, and the development of implicit knowledge. Natural opportunities for drawing attention to form are created when structural difficulties emerge. Project work maintains the authenticity and learner-centredness of TBLT, while its open-ended nature allows teachers to introduce structural support whenever it is needed.

Among the various ways of implementing tasks, project work occupies a distinctive and often underestimated place. Within a modular curriculum, projects can function as a unifying space where the structural and task-based strands converge. For instance, in preparing a class magazine, students might draw on their implicit resources through unfocused tasks such as brainstorming ideas or conducting interviews, and they integrate explicit knowledge of specific forms through structure-based instruction (e.g., reported speech, passive constructions). Project work highlights the complementarity of the two approaches without attempting to merge them artificially.

Moreover, projects embody the authenticity that TBLT aims for, while remaining compatible with educational settings where curricular or assessment constraints necessitate explicit instruction. They foster learner autonomy and critical thinking. They allow language learning to naturally intersect with other domains of knowledge, and they serve not only as pedagogical tools but also as sites of negotiation between theory-driven approaches and classroom realities.

In addition, projects are inherently interdisciplinary. They frequently involve extended engagement with topics that transcend purely linguistic concerns, incorporating cultural, literary, scientific, or civic dimensions. This interdisciplinarity creates space for the two different epistemologies of language teaching to interact productively. On the one hand, project work generates an authentic need for communication. Learners must collaborate, plan, and negotiate meaning in order to complete the project, thereby fostering the kinds of incidental, usage-based learning that TBLT advocates (Long 2015). On the other hand, projects can also highlight linguistic gaps that hinder progress. When learners struggle to express precise ideas or to conform to expected discourse conventions, teachers can draw on structure-based tools, including targeted TSLT interventions or even more traditional PPP techniques, to provide the scaffolding needed to move the project forward.

In this sense, project work functions as a “malga”, to borrow the metaphor of a mountain hut, offering shelter and a meeting place where different methodological travellers, both accuracy-driven and fluency-driven, or structure-focused and task-oriented, can converge without losing their distinct identities. Within the safety of a project framework, explicit attention to form can be legitimised as serving the communicative purpose of completing the project, rather than appearing as a digression from “real” communication. Projects also prevent form-focused teaching from sliding into sterile drill-based routines, since every explicit intervention must ultimately serve the broader communicative, interdisciplinary outcome of the project.

Projects additionally provide a concrete way of operationalising Ellis’s (2019) principle of modularity. Rather than attempting to blend structural and task-based syllabi into a single integrated sequence (a move that risks diluting the strengths of both approaches), project work allows each strand to contribute on its own terms. Learners may begin a project with unfocused tasks, engaging in exploratory talk and creative brainstorming. They may then encounter recurrent linguistic difficulties

that call for a structural module aimed at developing explicit awareness of key forms. This equips them with both implicit and explicit resources to advance towards the communicative outcome, especially if the teacher gives some flexibility to the alternation of the strands, depending on the demands of the students and the project itself.

Lastly, as mentioned before, project work has a strong motivational dimension. Decades of research have demonstrated that learners are more engaged, persistent, and reflective when they see their work contributing to a tangible product, whether it be a group presentation, a class magazine, a short film, or a community-oriented initiative (Beckett/Miller 2006; Stoller/Myers 2019). The motivational payoff ensures that learners are willing to tolerate the cognitive load of switching between implicit communication and explicit structural study, since both are clearly directed towards achieving something meaningful beyond the classroom.

In short, project work does not erase the methodological differences between TBLT and structure-based approaches. Instead, it provides a pragmatic ecology in which they can coexist, complement, and interact, thereby embodying the modular philosophy of curriculum design.

#### 2.4 APPROACHING CONTENT THROUGH MODULARITY: CONVERGENCES AND DIVERGENCES WITH CLIL

Within the modular framework adopted in this study, several projects can potentially incorporate disciplinary content or meta-linguistic knowledge alongside communicative objectives. The *Superquark* documentary project connects to historical and literary content. This may appear, at first glance, to approximate a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) model, as they incorporate subject-related content into the foreign language classroom. Yet while similarities exist, the modular approach remains conceptually distinct. It may therefore be helpful to clarify both the points of convergence with CLIL and the aspects in which the two orientations diverge.

As Ortega (2015) observes, CLIL and TBLT share a foundational commitment to meaning. Both approaches prioritise meaning and interaction as the principal engine of acquisition, with teachers and learners engaging in tasks that require “learning by doing” (Nikula 2015). Furthermore, both frameworks foreground authentic discourse.

Yet essential distinctions remain. CLIL, as defined by Coyle, Hood, and Marsh (2010), is explicitly designed as a dual-focused pedagogy that integrates subject content and language objectives on an equal footing. By contrast, modular TBLT retains language acquisition as its central aim.

Language in CLIL is typically scaffolded to ensure access to disciplinary knowledge, with linguistic targets often derived from the genres and discourse types characteristic

of the subject area (Lyster 2015; Pérez-Vidal/Roquet 2015). TBLT situates language within a broader real-world problem-solving context, where the importance of disciplinary content or meta-linguistic knowledge of registers is valued in itself, but its primary significance lies in the way it serves purposeful communication in context and facilitates language acquisition.

A further difference concerns the treatment of form. In CLIL, language support is embedded continuously throughout the subject sequence, with attention to features often tied to disciplinary texts and practices. Modular TBLT, by contrast, sequences form-focused work in a parallel strand, ensuring that implicit competence develops through meaning-focused work, while explicit knowledge is fostered through reactive, form-focused interventions (Ellis 2019, 2024).

In sum, CLIL and modular TBLT converge in their prioritisation of meaningful communication, experiential learning, and the integration of authentic discourse into the classroom. They differ, however, in their primary aims and sequencing principles: CLIL is fundamentally integrative, balancing subject and language objectives, while modular TBLT is language-centred. In the designed projects, content function as a catalyst for authentic language use, interaction, interlanguage development and cognitive engagement, rather than as an end in itself. By clarifying this distinction, the present framework situates itself not as a form of CLIL, but as a meaning-driven language teaching approach that selectively draws on content domains to enhance authenticity, intercultural engagement, purposeful communication in context, and eventually also boost the motivation to acquire content itself.

In practice, however, the CLIL and modular approaches can be combined. Research on the CLIL-TBLT interface has highlighted common ground. Yet, as Ortega (2015) observes, relatively little scholarship has explicitly examined this interface. Apart from those mentioned, in a special issue edited by Garcia Mayo (2015), research documents how task design can reinforce the integration of content and language in content-based classrooms. Mori and Yanagimachi (2015) demonstrate how multimodal collaboration in laboratory contexts sustains authentic instances of “language for learning”.

A likely and fruitful scenario is that the language teacher participates in an interdisciplinary CLIL pathway, adopting task-based methodologies to strengthen learners’ engagement with subject-specific registers and the three dimensions of language for learning, through learning, of learning (Coyle *et al.* 2010). In this way, the modular approach can complement CLIL by providing structured opportunities for meaning-focused tasks that are simultaneously sensitive to form, thus consolidating sectoral discourses without detaching them from authentic communicative practice. This has been the rationale of my own experimentation with colleagues (Petrocelli *et al.* 2022), where I integrated modular sequences into interdisciplinary projects carried out through CLIL methodology on STEAM subjects.

All in all, the modular curriculum provides a framework that is both theoretically

coherent and pedagogically adaptable. For this book, it serves as the conceptual anchor, showing how structure-based instruction and task-based pedagogy can coexist without incoherence, and how project work can offer a natural platform for the two strands. The following chapters will build on these premises, exploring how linguistics, language acquisition research, and classroom practice intersect in the design of tasks, projects, and curricula that aim to be both theoretically robust and pedagogically viable.

## 3. THE ROLE OF STRUCTURES IN A MODULAR CURRICULUM

### 3.1 STRUCTURES AND THEIR ACQUISITION

A central question for all language teaching frameworks moves around which grammatical features warrant explicit attention and structured practice, and which can be safely entrusted to incidental acquisition. Research in second language acquisition, informed by both theory and empirical study, suggests that not all linguistic structures are equally responsive to instruction, nor do they benefit from identical pedagogical treatments.

Skill Acquisition Theory (Anderson 1996; DeKeyser 1998, 2025) provides one influential framework, positing that some forms are particularly suited to proceduralisation through repeated practice, while others resist and remain difficult to master. Complementary perspectives from usage-based theories (N. Ellis 2006; Bybee 2008) highlight how salience, frequency, and L1 transfer affect the likelihood of successful acquisition. Furthermore, the Teachability Hypothesis (Pienemann 1984, 1985) underscores the role of developmental readiness, maintaining that learners can only acquire a structure if they have reached the appropriate stage in their interlanguage. In parallel, the Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt 1990, 2001) stresses that certain low-salience features require explicit input enhancement to become noted and integrated into a learner's linguistic system.

From these converging perspectives, three interrelated criteria emerge as especially significant in identifying which forms should be prioritised for structure-based instruction:

#### 1. Complexity and Salience.

Traditionally, the term “complexity” has been used in research on second language acquisition to refer to different aspects. Bulté, Housen and Pallotti (2025) identified four notions covered by it: «(a) structurally elaborate; (b) cognitively demanding; (c) acquired later; (d) typical of (more) proficient language use» (p. 537). They pointed out that such broad concepts might create confusion and elaborated a restricted definition which conceptualizes «language complexity as structural complexity, that

is, the quantity and variety of linguistic components and of the relationships between them» (p. 540). The authors also explore the concept of “difficulty” to refer to the effort and energy used to execute new linguistic elements. In other words, it is defined as the effort involved in «producing, comprehending, or learning a particular linguistic structure»; in this sense, they point out that «a linguistic structure is thus said to be more difficult if its processing (production, comprehension) and/or learning requires more cognitive resources (activity, energy, effort) from a language learner or user in a particular context» (p. 541).

As for salience, in second language acquisition, it refers to the perceptual or cognitive prominence that makes certain linguistic forms more likely to attract learners’ attention. It is not an intrinsic property of input but results from the interaction between input features, contextual factors, and learners’ cognitive or affective states (Della Putta/Ghia 2025). Scholars distinguish between perceptual salience (linked to prosodic, phonological, or syntactic contrast) and cognitive salience, which depends on the learner’s expectations, goals, and prior experience (N. Ellis 2018). While perceptibility and imageability can enhance salience (Goldschneider/DeKeyser 2001; Ghia 2011), they do not define it. All in all, salient elements, whether made prominent naturally or through instructional enhancement, are more likely to be attended to, noticed and processed, thus facilitating form–meaning connections and L2 development (N. Ellis 2006). Simple and highly frequent forms, like for example basic word order in English, tend to be acquired incidentally without the need for explicit intervention (Dulay/Burt 1974; Krashen 1982). By contrast, morphosyntactic features that are less perceptually salient or that involve greater processing demands, like the English article system, conditional clauses, or passive constructions, are often resistant to incidental acquisition (Han 2004).

## 2. Fossilisation and Persistent Errors.

Studies of error analysis and interlanguage development (Selinker 1972; Han 2004) demonstrate that certain features, if left unaddressed, tend to fossilise due to “learned selective inattention” (N. Ellis 2006). Persistent difficulties are well documented for features such as the third-person singular -s, the use of articles, tense morphology, and certain irregular verb forms. Explicit instruction in such cases may not guarantee full restructuring, but it can raise metalinguistic awareness and encourage attentional focus that would otherwise not occur. Evidence also suggests that aptitude interacts with complexity. Yalçın and Spada (2016) found that explicit instruction in the passive benefited only learners with strong grammatical inferencing ability, underscoring the variability of instructional effects.

## 3. Functional and Communicative Value.

Certain grammatical forms play a disproportionately significant role in academic, professional, or formal registers. Passive constructions are pervasive in scientific reporting (Banks 2017; Seoane/Hundt 2018), while modals of obligation and hedging

devices are central to expressing stance in academic and professional writing (Biber *et al.* 1999). When instructional goals include preparing learners for academic or workplace communication, prioritising these structures ensures alignment with communicative needs and institutional requirements, such as exam syllabi. Structure-based instruction therefore plays a selective yet important role, targeting features unlikely to emerge incidentally, susceptible to stabilisation or at risk of fossilisation, or else relevant for communicative and institutional purposes. In this way, it complements task-based work by supporting accuracy without undermining fluency.

Another central issue in SLA research is how linguistic forms are acquired and whether their mastery depends on explicit instruction and practice or whether they emerge primarily through implicit, usage-based processes. Structure-based approaches, including the PPP model and its communicative development in TSLT, draw on skill-learning theory (Anderson 1996; DeKeyser 1998, 2025), where acquisition proceeds from declarative to procedural knowledge and, through practice, towards automatization. As DeKeyser (1998: 45) noted, «practice is the only way to achieve automaticity», although he also recognised that complex or low-saliency forms such as articles, conditionals, or modals often resist this route and remain as explicit knowledge that is only functionally equivalent to implicit competence.

TBLT, by contrast, is grounded in theories that stress the primacy of implicit learning and interactional processes (Long 1991, 2015; Tomasello 2003; N. Ellis 2003, 2006). Development is seen as gradual and constrained by learners' internal syllabus (Corder 1967; Pienemann 1984, 1985), meaning that explicit teaching cannot override developmental stages. Instruction is most effective when embedded in communicative tasks that promote noticing and provide repeated exposure and use (Schmidt 1990; Ellis 2003a, 2003b, 2006). Usage-based models (Bybee 2008; N. Ellis 2006) reinforce this view, showing how competence emerges from the entrenchment of frequent patterns and their gradual abstraction into rules.

These perspectives intersect in the interface debate. The non-interface position (Krashen 1982) rejects the conversion of explicit into implicit knowledge, while the strong-interface view argues the opposite, claiming that practice can proceduralise explicit knowledge (DeKeyser 1998). The weak-interface account (Ellis 1993) takes a middle ground: explicit knowledge cannot become implicit directly, but it can facilitate acquisition by supporting noticing, noticing-the-gap, and monitoring.

This theoretical tension is also visible in the contrast between Focus on Forms (FonFs) and Focus on Form (FonF) (Long 1991). FonFs, aligned with structural syllabuses (Wilkins 1976; White 1988) and the PPP cycle, treats grammatical items sequentially with progress measured in accuracy. FonF, instead, draws attention to forms as they arise within meaning-focused communication, consistent with the Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt 1990) and with task-based perspectives more generally.

From a modular perspective, these debates are not resolved in favour of one

position but reframed. Some features can be acquired incidentally through tasks, while others demand explicit attention. It is to the teacher to identify on which forms their group of learners need explicit FFI in a set moment.

Empirical research supports this selective role for explicit instruction. In immersion contexts, Day and Shapson (1991) and Harley (1989) found that functional grammar teaching improved learners' control of complex forms that input alone did not secure. With younger learners, Shintani (2016) showed that input-based tasks targeting the plural -s enhanced accuracy even without output practice. Aptitude-based studies add further nuance: Yalçın and Spada (2016) demonstrated that learners with high grammatical inferencing ability benefited most from explicit instruction on complex forms such as the passive. These findings underline that the structural strand in modular curricula should be used selectively and reactively, as Ellis (2019, 2024) argues, to provide remedial support where incidental learning is insufficient.

### 3.2 TARGET STRUCTURES IN A CHECKLIST

The following list of structures did not originate as a prescriptive syllabus, but rather from my own need, as a teacher and a researcher, to establish an indicative baseline checklist against which to monitor learners' development. This need was informed and nourished by SLA research, which provided theoretical grounding and empirical support for what classroom experience had already suggested. Over time, a set of forms emerged as particularly recurrent and meaningful across projects: forms that were either resistant to incidental acquisition, susceptible to stabilisation or at risk of fossilisation, or else central for communicative effectiveness. At the same time, this baseline was never applied mechanically. In some classes, early and mid, or mid and late stage forms were combined within the same project, reflecting the variability of learners' needs. Moreover, additional forms occasionally emerged in the course of classroom work when they proved particularly problematic, leading me to adapt the checklist by removing or adding items according to the specific cohort, as will be shown.

From this perspective, the developmental progression outlined below should be read not as a rigid sequence, but as an operational framework shaped by the intersection of research evidence and pedagogical practice. It reflects my attempt to combine theoretical insights with classroom pragmatics, ensuring that structure-based instruction remained selective, flexible, and responsive to learners' actual need. The structures can be arranged along a continuum, ranging from those that often emerge at lower proficiency levels to those typically associated with more advanced interlanguage. However, this ordering is only indicative. Because many of these items may be susceptible to stabilisation or at risk of fossilisation, difficulties with forms such as the plural -s or past tense may reappear even at higher levels, while features usually linked to advanced proficiency, such as clefts, dislocation, or extraposition,

may surface earlier under specific communicative pressures. The list should therefore not be read as a rigid staircase but as a wavering line, oscillating back and forth according to learners' needs and developmental paths.

Indicative baseline checklist of structures:

- Basic morphosyntax: plural -s, past tense forms.
- Expanding repertoire: third-person singular -s, articles, epistemic modals.
- Complex sentence forms: passive voice, conditionals, reported speech.
- Stylistically marked devices: discourse markers, marked word order (inversion, dislocation, fronting, clefts, extraposition).

It should be stressed that the checklist presented here is deliberately selective. The linguistic forms included are relatively few, selected because SLA research consistently identifies them as problematic or particularly resistant to incidental acquisition. For this research, I have focused on these most recurrent and meaningful structures, as will be shown. In actual classroom practice, however, the range of linguistic targets is necessarily broader. Teachers must also respond to curricular requirements, level progression, and certification demands, which inevitably entail the inclusion of additional structures beyond those illustrated here. The checklist should therefore not be viewed as an exhaustive syllabus, but rather as an indicative framework, a practical reference highlighting key acquisition challenges while allowing for adaptation and expansion according to local needs and professional judgement.

In my own practice, it served precisely this baseline function: a flexible guide that remained in the background, informing lesson design and sequencing, yet varying in its concrete application depending on context and learner needs. The adaptive use of the checklist is evident in the case of comparatives and superlatives, which were not initially included in my baseline checklist, but over time, I came to recognise the necessity of incorporating them. This decision was motivated partly by their frequent use in learners' interlanguage and partly by the communicative demands of specific projects, most notably *The Ad Challenge*, which had some inherently comparative tasks where outcomes required learners to choose among competing options. In such contexts, explicit attention to comparatives and superlatives became indispensable. At more advanced stages, I often addressed these forms through recasts during task execution and, on occasion, by borrowing focus-on-forms activities from other projects to raise awareness.

A similar adjustment applied to the use of imperatives. While not structurally complex for Italian learners, imperatives proved to be pragmatically problematic. Learners tended to rely on them excessively, often in situations where they risked sounding overly direct or impolite. For this reason, I found it essential to contrast imperatives with more hedged alternatives, such as epistemic modals or other mitigation strategies, so that learners could appreciate how different forms encode different degrees of politeness. In this way, attention to imperatives was less about

grammatical accuracy than about raising pragmatic awareness. Another example illustrating the rationale behind the choice of structures, and the adaptability of the checklist, can be drawn from the treatment of SVO-related patterns. I gradually extended the focus from simpler patterns, such as subject-verb inversion in questions, to more marked word orders, including fronting, cleft sentences, and dislocation. This choice was prompted by the linguistic demands of the two genres involved (the promotional texts in the first project and the literary-documentary ones in the third), where such structures tend to occur more frequently. I therefore wanted to be ready to encourage learners to notice and reflect on their use, responding to the learning needs emerging from each context.

Taken together, these examples illustrate how the checklist functioned less as a fixed syllabus than as a flexible diagnostic tool, responsive both to recurrent patterns in learner output and to the communicative or pragmatic requirements of individual projects.

The analyses that follow focus on selected grammatical structures included in the checklist. Again, they exemplify the intersection of linguistic form, acquisitional challenge, and pedagogical relevance. Each structure is described, traced across developmental stages, and linked to communicative and instructional concerns. The discussion opens with the plural *-s*.

### 3.2.1 *The plural -s*

The English plural *-s* represents the prototypical case of an inflectional morpheme marking number on count nouns. Morphosyntactically, it attaches as a suffix, subject to predictable allomorphic variation (*/s/*, */z/*, */ɪz/*) depending on phonological environment. Semantically, it realises the contrast between singular and non-singular reference, indicating that a noun refers to more than one item. While the rule for adding plural *-s* is regular, its meaning changes with mass/count distinctions, generic uses, and context, so acquisition requires attention to both grammar and interpretation (Huddleston/Pullum 2002).

From an acquisitional perspective, plural marking has long occupied a central position in developmental research. As with the past tense morpheme *-ed*, the acquisition of the English plural *-s* is also shaped by differences in salience. Learners tend to rely on more salient lexical indicators of plurality, such as quantifiers like *many* or *a lot of* or numerals, which are perceived as strong and sufficient cues for plural reference. These semantically transparent and perceptually prominent elements can overshadow the inflectional morpheme *-s*, leading to its omission or inconsistent use at early stages of interlanguage development, particularly among learners whose first languages exhibit little or no overt number morphology. This illustrates a form of blocking, whereby attention to a highly salient cue inhibits the processing of a less salient but grammatically essential one (N. Ellis 2006, 2018; Della Putta/Ghia 2025). Brown (1973) identified it as one of the earliest morphemes

stabilised in L1 English, with children producing plural forms reliably by age three. Dulay and Burt (1974) confirmed its early emergence in L2 morpheme studies, but also noted that L2 learners progress more slowly and inconsistently than L1 children. Subsequent research has highlighted the striking variability that persists across stages of interlanguage. Lardiere (2000), within her feature reassembly account, argued that even when learners appear to master the surface form, the underlying grammatical features associated with it may not yet be fully reconfigured. As a result, feature specification remains unstable, leading to oscillation between marked and unmarked nouns. Longitudinal evidence from Jia (2003) on Mandarin-speaking immigrants demonstrated that after five years of exposure, only a subset of learners consistently marked plural nouns, underscoring the protracted timescale of morphological acquisition in L2.

Typical error patterns reveal the developmental challenges. Omission of plural -s is widespread, often reflecting processing constraints or lack of attentional resources in real-time production («two book»). The lack of pluralisation (with morpheme -s) of non-count nouns in English (and, to a lesser extent, of some irregular nouns) also contributes to the difficulty of acquiring this structure, as the rule is not consistently applied. Overgeneralisation produces forms such as «informations» or «sheeps», which show awareness of the rule but misapplication beyond its domain. Learners whose L1 lacks inflectional number morphology may omit or underuse -s, whereas those with rich plural systems sometimes overapply it to mass nouns, evidencing L1 transfer effects (White 2003). Learners also show difficulty with irregular plurals and with the interaction of plural marking and determiner-noun agreement, supporting the view that acquisition involves both rule learning and the integration of phonological, semantic, and processing constraints.

Developmental sequencing studies place plural -s among the earlier L2 morphemes, though its mastery is far from immediate. Learners often pass through stages of bare-noun reliance, fluctuating use, and eventual stabilisation, with individual differences shaped by input, salience, and transfer (Larsen-Freeman/Long 1991). Empirical research further confirms that comprehension precedes production: learners can interpret plural meaning in input before reliably encoding it in output (Jia 2003). Corpus-based analyses also point to its high frequency in both spoken and written registers, reinforcing its communicative indispensability (Biber *et al.* 1999).

The communicative and pragmatic value of plural marking is considerable. In discourse, it signals referential precision, supports cohesion in tracking sets of entities, and enables contrasts between singular and plural reference. Omission may create ambiguity («I saw dog») or pragmatic incongruence, especially in academic and professional genres where numerical accuracy is crucial. At advanced stages, occasional non-marking may occur in reduced registers (e.g., headlines), but these are genre-licensed exceptions rather than genuine gaps in competence. Mastery of plural -s is therefore not merely ornamental but central to effective communication

across contexts.

Pedagogically, the acquisition of plural -s illustrates the rationale for a modular curriculum. While frequent in input, its acquisition is neither automatic nor uniform, and without focused attention learners risk fossilising omission or overgeneralisation. Shintani (2016) showed that input-based instruction targeting plural forms can significantly improve learner accuracy, supporting the role of structured input in early stages. In modular sequencing, simple high-frequency nouns (*books, cats*) can serve as entry points, with later modules addressing phonologically complex forms (*buses, boxes*) and irregular plurals. Recycling plural marking across vocabulary, reading, and writing modules reinforces distributed practice, while contrastive modules can draw explicit attention to L1-L2 differences in pluralisation. In this way, the modular approach integrates implicit and explicit strands: communicative tasks motivate learners to mobilise plurality in authentic contexts, while structural modules address persistent errors and consolidate form-function mappings.

The case of plural -s thus exemplifies a general principle of modular instruction. Although morphologically regular and frequent, it is vulnerable to omission and transfer, and its acquisition requires targeted scaffolding to ensure stability. Moreover, its high communicative load across registers justifies systematic inclusion in the structural strand of a modular curriculum, where learners can progress from fluctuating, form-limited use to reliable, pragmatically effective command.

### 3.2.2 *Definite and indefinite articles*

The English article system, comprising both the definite article *the* and the indefinite articles *a/an*, is notoriously problematic for L2 learners, even at advanced proficiency levels. Unlike plural marking or tense morphology, articles are semantically subtle and highly dependent on discourse context, making them difficult to acquire incidentally. From a linguistic perspective, articles encode distinctions of definiteness, specificity, and generic reference (Hawkins 1978; Lyons 1999). These categories, however, do not always align neatly across languages, creating conditions for persistent negative transfer.

Cross-linguistic influence also plays a major role. Learners from article-less L1 backgrounds (e.g., Russian, Chinese, Korean) often omit articles or overgeneralise *the*, while those from article-rich languages (e.g., Spanish, Arabic) tend to misapply rules of definiteness and specificity. Russian lacks articles altogether, while Korean relies on topic markers to convey pragmatic salience, which leads learners to underuse articles in English (Celce-Murcia/Freeman 1999; Ionin *et al.* 2004; Cowan 2008; Chrabaszcz/Nan 2014; Sarker/Baek 2017).

From an acquisitional perspective, articles are low in perceptual salience: they are unstressed, phonologically reduced, and do not carry inherent lexical meaning (N. Ellis 2006). This makes them particularly vulnerable to what N. Ellis (2006) terms “learned selective inattention”, where learners focus instead on more semantically

salient elements such as nouns and verbs. Early research by Dulay and Burt (1974) suggested that article errors were among the most common across L2 learners, persisting even after years of exposure. More recent work has refined the picture: Ionin, Ko, and Wexler's (2004) Fluctuation Hypothesis posits that learners without an article system fluctuate between definiteness and specificity settings until sufficient input stabilises their interlanguage. This accounts for the variability observed in learner production, where *the* may be used for specific indefinites (*I saw the book yesterday*, referring to a new book) or omitted where definiteness is required.

Fossilisation is a recurring concern. Han (2004) documents how article misuse can persist even in highly advanced learners, illustrating the limits of incidental acquisition and the necessity of explicit instructional intervention. Input enhancement and CR tasks (Ellis 1993; Shintani 2016) have been shown to increase learners' noticing of article use, though accuracy gains are often slow and incremental.

Articles illustrate the tension between form and function in SLA. Explicit instruction and CR activities can improve learners' metalinguistic awareness of article use (Master 1997), but automatised use is rare. From a modular curriculum perspective, articles exemplify why a structural strand is indispensable. In TBLT contexts, learners may acquire global fluency and communicative competence while continuing to misuse articles, often without communicative breakdown. However, since accurate article usage plays a critical role in academic writing, professional registers, and advanced discourse, it becomes a priority for explicit instruction. Tasks that combine communicative goals with targeted attention to article choice, such as storytelling or academic summary writing, can provide contexts for awareness-raising, while structure-based modules supply the explicit explanations and guided practice necessary to overcome fossilisation.

### 3.2.3 *Past tense*

The acquisition of the English past tense has long been a central topic in SLA research, owing to its high functional value, morphological regularity, and frequent difficulty for learners. From a linguistic perspective, English marks the past tense primarily through the regular suffix *-ed*, alongside a wide range of irregular forms (e.g., *went*, *saw*, *took*). Nick Ellis (2018: 28–29) mentions the *-ed* past tense morpheme as an example of a low-salience feature. To express temporality, learners rely on more salient lexical cues. For example, the adverb *yesterday* reliably signals reference to past time. Because such adverbs are perceptually and semantically prominent, learners treat them as strong predictors of past-time reference and may therefore associate the temporal meaning primarily with the adverb itself, rendering the grammatical marking of past tense somewhat redundant in terms of meaning. This high salience can, however, overshadow less perceptually salient but functionally crucial forms such as the inflectional morpheme *-ed*, particularly for learners whose L1s have limited verbal morphology. The prominence of the adverb thus “blocks” attention

to the lower-salience morpheme, making it more difficult to acquire (N. Ellis 2006, 2018; Della Putta/Ghia 2025). While the regular paradigm is rule-governed and relatively transparent, irregular verbs demand rote memorisation, making the system hybrid in nature (Bybee/Slobin 1982; Bybee/Moder 1983). In rapid speech, the -ed ending is frequently reduced or elided, limiting learners' opportunities to notice it (see N. Ellis 2017). This lack of perceptual salience, combined with L1 transfer and processing constraints, contributes to its delayed and variable acquisition.

Research consistently shows that learners progress through predictable developmental stages in acquiring the past tense, providing strong evidence of both the difficulty and partial learnability of its morphology. Across proficiency levels, they often omit or misapply tense markers, producing bare verb stems («Yesterday I go to school») or overgeneralising the -ed rule («comed», «eated»). Dulay and Burt (1974) and Bailey, Madden and Krashen (1974) observed that learners initially rely on temporal adverbials (e.g., «yesterday», «last week») as primary indicators of past reference before consistently applying verbal inflection. Morpheme-order studies (Dulay/Burt 1974) further placed past-tense -ed relatively late, after plural -s and progressive -ing. More recent longitudinal research (Jia/Fuse 2007) confirmed that even after years of exposure, late L2 learners underuse past-tense marking compared with native speakers, suggesting fossilisation effects. Han (2004) likewise noted the persistence of such errors among adult learners, particularly those whose L1 lacks obligatory tense morphology. Overall, interlanguage studies (Pienemann 1984, 1985; Bardovi-Harlig 2000) indicate that learners first mark tense lexically, then variably on irregular verbs, and only later extend inflectional marking systematically to regular verbs.

The reasons for these difficulties are several. First, the low perceptual salience of inflectional morphemes (particularly in unstressed syllables, e.g., *walked* /wɔ:kt/) renders them difficult to notice in input (Ellis 2006). Second, crosslinguistic influence plays a major role: learners from languages without overt tense morphology (e.g., Chinese, Vietnamese) often rely on temporal adverbials instead of verbal inflection (Jia/Fuse 2007). Third, variability in L2 production reflects developmental sequences: learners often first rely on lexical means (such as temporal adverbs), then acquire irregular high-frequency verbs, and only later begin to consistently mark regular -ed forms (Dietrich *et al.* 1995).

Experimental studies also show that explicit instruction can facilitate acquisition. Studies in immersion and instructed contexts (Harley 1989; Day/Shapson 1991) demonstrated that focused grammar teaching can improve accuracy in past tense use, even in meaning-focused classrooms. Spada and Tomita's (2010) meta-analysis indicates that explicit form-focused instruction yields measurable gains in the acquisition of morphosyntactic features, including tense-aspect morphology, particularly for learners with higher aptitude. Shintani (2016) further showed that young learners benefit from input-based tasks that highlight tense morphology (e.g.,

story retelling with temporal prompts), suggesting that explicit input enhancement can accelerate acquisition.

These findings suggest that the English past tense is both a core target for structure-based instruction and a prototypical example of a feature vulnerable to underacquisition if left solely to implicit learning. Its clear form-meaning mapping allows it to be explained explicitly, but because it is not very perceptible and is easily influenced by L1 transfer, learners need repeated exposure and practice in communicative contexts. Within a modular curriculum, therefore, the past tense justifies inclusion in the structural strand as one of the canonical problem areas that require explicit intervention alongside task-based opportunities for implicit consolidation.

### 3.2.4 *Third person singular -s*

The English third person singular *-s* (e.g., *she runs, he eats*) represents one of the most persistent challenges in L2 acquisition despite its apparent simplicity and regularity. Linguistically, the morpheme marks subject–verb agreement in the present tense, applying exclusively to third-person singular subjects in the indicative mood. As Nick Ellis (2006, 2018) observes, grammatical forms that carry little perceptual salience or communicative weight are often acquired late or used inconsistently. The English third person singular *-s* is a clear example. Although required by morphosyntactic rules, it adds no new meaning because person and number are already expressed in the subject noun phrase. This redundancy reduces its cue value in communication and helps explain why learners frequently omit it (Lardiere 2000).

Acquisition research has consistently shown that *-s* is one of the last morphemes to be fully mastered by L2 learners. Dulay and Burt (1974) placed it late in their morpheme acquisition order for child learners, and subsequent research has confirmed its persistent variability across learner populations (Goldschneider/DeKeyser 2001). Even advanced learners often fail to supply it consistently, producing sentences such as «She go to school every day». Lardiere’s (1998, 2000) longitudinal case study of Patty, a highly advanced Chinese learner of English, demonstrated fossilisation: despite over 18 years of exposure, her use of agreement morphology remained highly variable. Loewen, Erlam and Ellis (2009) examined whether extensive incidental exposure could lead to the acquisition of third person *-s* as implicit or explicit knowledge. Results indicated that neither type of knowledge improved following an input flood treatment. Learners’ implicit control remained weak, and explicit knowledge did not increase. The lack of progress was attributed to the low salience of third person *-s*, attentional blocking, and the impossibility of dual-tasking, as learners’ attention was directed toward another grammatical feature. These findings suggest that incidental acquisition of low-salience, form-focused features such as third person *-s* is unlikely, even under intensive exposure.

Several explanations have been offered for this difficulty. From a psycholinguistic

perspective, the morpheme's low perceptual salience (final consonant in unstressed syllables) makes it difficult to notice in input (N. Ellis 2006). From a processing perspective, its morphological redundancy reduces communicative pressure for accurate use (Hawkins/Chan 1997). Crosslinguistic influence is also significant: in languages without subject-verb agreement (e.g., Mandarin, Japanese), learners must acquire a grammatical distinction absent in their L1. Developmental accounts, such as Pienemann's (1984, 1985) Teachability Hypothesis, suggest that agreement morphology is acquired relatively late, after learners have developed control over word order and basic tense morphology.

Empirical studies confirm that instruction can improve learners' accuracy with -s, though gains are often fragile. Goldschneider and DeKeyser's (2001) meta-analysis identified salience, frequency, and semantic redundancy as key predictors of morpheme difficulty, with the -s feature ranking among the most challenging. Yalçın and Spada (2016) showed that learners with higher grammatical inferencing ability benefited more from explicit instruction targeting agreement morphology, while those with lower aptitude showed minimal improvement. These findings underscore both the learnability and the resilience of errors in this domain.

Within a modular curriculum, third-person singular -s exemplifies a structure that warrants inclusion in the structural strand. Its low communicative load makes it unlikely to stabilise through task-based exposure alone, while its status as a core morphosyntactic feature of English ensures its importance in formal registers and assessment contexts. Explicit instruction, awareness-raising, and targeted practice can therefore complement communicative tasks by ensuring that learners not only develop fluency but also meet the accuracy demands of institutional and professional settings.

### 3.2.5 *Passive voice*

The passive voice in English is a particularly complex structure, both morphosyntactically and pragmatically, and has long been the focus of SLA research. At the grammatical level, the passive requires syntactic restructuring: the object of an active clause is promoted to subject position, accompanied by the auxiliary *be* and a past participle (*The committee approved the proposal* → *The proposal was approved by the committee*). For learners whose L1s either lack productive passives or employ them less frequently, this restructuring poses significant challenges. Studies have shown that learners often avoid passives altogether or simplify them in production, relying disproportionately on canonical active forms (Odlin 1989; Hinkel 2020).

Additional complexity arises with double-object constructions, which permit two alternative passivisations (*He was given a book* vs. *A book was given to him*). Research indicates that L2 learners struggle with these options, sometimes producing ungrammatical forms such as «He was given him a book» or overusing prepositions (*A book was given to him by her*), reflecting difficulties in argument mapping and

discourse-driven choices (White 1989; Hawkins 2001).

The acquisition of middle voice constructions (*This book reads easily; The cake cuts well*) adds a further layer of complexity. Middles resemble passives morphologically but differ semantically, as the subject is both syntactic subject and semantic patient without an expressed agent. Learners commonly confuse middle constructions with standard passives, which can result in forms like «This book is reads easily». These errors highlight the cognitive challenge of mastering thematic roles, agentivity, and event structure (Kemmer 1993; Huddleston/Pullum 2002).

Developmental studies suggest a sequence in which learners comprehend passives earlier than they produce them. Agentive passives (*The letter was written by Mary*) are generally acquired before agentless forms (*The letter was written*), with adjectival passives (*The door is closed*) and middles emerging later (see Horgan 1978). Common interlanguage errors include auxiliary omissions («is wrote»), incorrect participle morphology («was ate»), and overgeneralisation to intransitives («was arrived»). These patterns point to the passive as a late-acquired structure, highly sensitive to processing constraints and input frequency (see Deen 2011).

At the discourse-pragmatic level, the passive is essential for information management. It enables speakers and writers to highlight patients, downplay agents, and follow the principle of given–new information. Misuse often reflects not just grammatical gaps but insufficient sensitivity to discourse norms. Corpus-based research (Biber *et al.* 1999; Banks 2017; Seoane/Hundt 2018; Di Ferrante 2023) showed that passives are especially common in academic prose and scientific reporting, where impersonal style and agent suppression are communicatively functional. Learners’ underuse or overuse of passives can therefore be interpreted as evidence of incomplete acquisition of discourse-level conventions (Celce-Murcia/Larsen-Freeman 1999).

Overall, the passive exemplifies the type of structure that Ellis (2019, 2024) argues could be addressed in the structural strand of a modular curriculum: it is complex, susceptible to stabilisation or at risk of fossilisation, and communicatively salient in certain registers. From a linguistic perspective, its acquisition requires mastery of multiple layers; morphosyntactic restructuring, argument structure mapping, and discourse pragmatics, which makes it unlikely to be fully acquired incidentally.

Tasks provide ideal conditions for noticing, scaffolding, and safe risk-taking. They can systematically expose learners to varied passive constructions, prompting experimentation with both common and less frequent forms. Project-based science experiments, instructional writing, or collaborative historical simulations encourage learners to produce agentless passives, double-object passives, and middle voices, progressively stabilising their interlanguage forms. Risk-taking is particularly relevant in these contexts, as attempting complex passives, even imperfectly, marks advancement at the “cutting edge” of interlanguage development (Foster/Skehan 1996).

### 3.2.6 *Conditional constructions*

Conditional constructions in English constitute one of the most complex intersections of morphosyntax, semantics, and pragmatics. They encode hypothetical, counterfactual, or generalised relations between events, and their mastery requires learners to integrate tense, aspect, modality, and discourse-pragmatic interpretation. Canonical taxonomies distinguish between three main types: the first conditional (*If it rains tomorrow, we will cancel the picnic*), expressing likely future scenarios; the second conditional (*If I were rich, I would travel the world*), used for hypothetical or counterfactual states; and the third conditional (*If she had studied, she would have passed the exam*), which refers to past counterfactuals and demands accurate control of morphology and auxiliary sequencing (Comrie 1986; Huddleston/Pullum 2002; Dancygier/Sweetser 2005).

From an acquisitional perspective, conditionals are a late-acquired domain (Götz 2015), with substantial evidence showing that learners struggle with both their morphosyntactic and pragmatic dimensions. Apart from frequent simplification, avoidance, and overgeneralisation (Celce-Murcia/ Larsen-Freeman 1999), typical errors include the substitution of simple past for past perfect in third conditionals («If she studied, she would have passed»), misuse of auxiliaries («If I would have time, I will help you»), and mismatched tense-aspect sequences that reflect processing constraints (Mitchell/Myles 2004). Research with native-speaking children (Badger/Mellanby 2018) indicates that the ability to produce complex conditionals develops earlier than the ability to comprehend them, highlighting the high cognitive and linguistic demands of integrating tense, modality, and hypothetical meaning. These findings mirror patterns observed in second language acquisition. Studies with adult and university-level EFL learners show that Type II and Type III conditionals, and particularly modal-perfect combinations (*would have + past participle*), remain problematic even for advanced users. Learners often rely on formulaic or partially mastered patterns without full control of the semantic distinctions between real, hypothetical, and counterfactual meaning (Alzamil 2022; Uludag 2025). Empirical data from Chinese-speaking learners (Chou 2000) confirmed that acquisition order is strongly shaped by L1 transfer, with third conditionals and counterfactual forms posing the greatest difficulty. Such persistent difficulties suggest that the acquisition of English conditionals involves both developmental and processing constraints, as the morphosyntactic realisation of conditional meaning is cognitively demanding and less salient in the input.

Pragmatic interpretation adds to these structural challenges. Learners must grasp not only the grammatical form but also the speaker's intent and the contextual likelihood of an event. Misalignment often occurs through the use of *I wish* and when second conditionals are used to describe probable scenarios (*If it rained tomorrow, we would stay at home*), creating pragmatic incongruence (Declerck/Reed 2001; Jones/Waller 2011; Suraprajit 2022). Further, research shows that learners sometimes

fail to differentiate between conditionals used for logical reasoning (*If we mix these chemicals, an explosion will occur*) and those used for interpersonal interaction (*If I were you, I'd talk to the teacher*), leading to communicative breakdowns despite partial grammatical accuracy.

Developmental evidence supports the claim that comprehension precedes production: L2 learners can often interpret the intended meaning of conditional forms in input before producing them with syntactic and semantic precision (Ellis/Barkhuizen 2005). Early stages are typically characterised by reliance on first conditionals with gradual progression towards second and third conditionals as processing resources expand. Studies with Mandarin-speaking secondary students highlighted the difficulty of tense backshifting and the tendency to oversimplify past counterfactuals, showing that even when meaning is understood, form-function mappings remain unstable (Walenta 2019).

Corpus-based analyses underscore the functional indispensability of conditionals across registers. First conditionals dominate in spoken interaction and everyday exchanges, whereas second and third conditionals are frequent in argumentative discourse, academic writing, and professional communication (Biber *et al.* 1999). Their pervasiveness in academic and workplace genres underlines the necessity of acquiring accurate and contextually appropriate conditional usage, not only for linguistic competence but also for institutional success.

Finally, from a teaching perspective, scaffolded project-based tasks offer an effective environment for experimentation with conditionals. *What-if* scenarios, contingency planning, or collaborative debates compel learners to mobilise conditional reasoning in authentic communicative contexts. Such tasks support the development of complexity, accuracy, and fluency (CAF), encouraging learners to take calculated risks with multi-clause and modal-perfect constructions while gradually stabilising their interlanguage system. In this way, conditionals demonstrate how linguistic complexity, cognitive processing, and communicative necessity converge, making them a compelling target for the structural strand of a modular approach.

The case of English conditionals illustrates with particular clarity why a modular curriculum is necessary. On the one hand, their morphosyntactic and pragmatic complexity makes them unlikely candidates for incidental acquisition: without explicit scaffolding, learners risk fossilising simplified forms or misaligning form-function mappings (Celce-Murcia /Larsen-Freeman 1999; Walenta 2019). On the other hand, their high functional load across academic, professional, and interpersonal registers means that omitting them from instruction would severely limit learners' communicative repertoires (Biber *et al.* 1999; Dancygier/Sweetser 2005). This dual status, as both structurally demanding and communicatively indispensable, justifies their inclusion in the structural strand of a modular curriculum (Ellis 2019, 2024). Within this framework, task-based components provide opportunities for meaningful use and experimentation, while structure-based modules target persistent errors and

enhance learners' awareness of tense–modality sequencing. Conditionals exemplify how modularity reconciles the limits of purely implicit or purely explicit approaches, ensuring that learners can progress towards both accuracy and communicative effectiveness.

### 3.2.7 Reported speech

Reported speech constitutes one of the most complex grammatical domains in English, sitting at the interface of morphosyntax, pragmatics, and discourse organisation. Its acquisition demands mastery of multiple interdependent processes: tense backshifting (e.g., *will* → *would*), pronoun shifts (*I* → *she*), and deictic adjustments (*tomorrow* → *the next day*). For example:

- Direct: *She said, "I will attend the meeting tomorrow"*.
- Indirect: *She said that she would attend the meeting the next day*.

These transformations require learners to re-anchor utterances in time and perspective, tasks that impose a heavy cognitive load, especially when embedded clauses or complex reporting verbs are involved. In addition to unmarked verbs such as *say* or *tell*, English offers a range of marked reporting verbs (*admit, claim, warn, promise*) that encode illocutionary force and speaker stance (Quirk *et al.* 1985; Huddleston/Pullum 2002). Mastery of such verbs requires not only syntactic control but also pragmatic sensitivity to interpersonal meaning.

From a developmental perspective, research has shown that reported speech is a late-acquired and error-prone domain in second language acquisition (Götz 2015). Learners struggle particularly with tense backshifting, pronoun adjustments, and temporal adverbials, which represent persistent areas of vulnerability in interlanguage (Celce-Murcia/Larsen-Freeman 1999; Swan 2005). Cross-contextual evidence further suggests that the learning environment shapes development: foreign-language (FL) learners often over-apply prescriptive rules of backshifting, while second-language (SL) learners display greater pragmatic flexibility, reflecting exposure to authentic input (Schmidt 1990; Bardovi-Harlig 2001), especially in collaborative learning settings (Kos/Friedrich 2025). At the same time, empirical studies show that omissions of the complementiser *that*, tense mismatches, and difficulties with marked reporting verbs persist even at advanced levels (Quirk *et al.* 1985; Huddleston/Pullum 2002).

Corpus-based research underscores a further challenge: authentic English usage diverges from textbook models. Studies of spoken and written corpora indicate far greater variability, optionality, and pragmatic ellipsis in reported speech than what is typically presented in pedagogical materials (Biber *et al.* 1999; Leech/Svartvik 2002). This gap between prescriptive rules and actual usage complicates acquisition and may explain learners' tendency to avoid reported speech or reduce it to simplified active constructions. Developmentally, comprehension of reported forms usually precedes production: learners can interpret indirect reports in context but often

rely on unmarked verbs (*say, tell*) and single embeddings before attempting multiple levels of reported speech. Errors increase with syntactic depth and pragmatic mastery develops even more slowly, requiring learners to grasp how marked reporting verbs encode stance, modality, and evidentiality (Hyland 2005).

Pedagogically, reported speech fits Ellis's (2019, 2024) criteria for inclusion in the structural strand of a modular curriculum: it is cognitively demanding, communicatively important, and unlikely to be mastered through incidental exposure alone. Task-supported approaches offer a productive pathway by embedding reported speech in meaningful communicative contexts. Project-based activities, such as summarising peer interviews, recounting news events, or reporting group decisions, naturally elicit indirect speech, enabling learners to practise backshifting, pronoun adjustment, and verb selection within authentic discourse. Collaborative writing tasks, in particular, have been shown to foster gradual gains, though improvements may remain modest without explicit scaffolding (Kos/Friedrich 2025).

Reported speech exemplifies a structural domain where linguistic complexity, processing demands, and pragmatic nuance converge. Its acquisition trajectory is slow, susceptible to stabilisation or at risk of fossilisation, and highly sensitive to instructional design. Within a modular curriculum, it represents a paradigmatic case for targeted, explicit instruction that is reinforced through authentic, task-supported communication.

### 3.2.8 Epistemic modals

Epistemic modality, encoded also through modal auxiliaries such as *might, could, may, and must*, conveys the speaker's assessment of the likelihood, certainty, or evidential basis of a proposition (Coates 1983; Palmer 2001). Unlike deontic modality, which regulates obligation or permission (*You must finish your homework*), epistemic modality evaluates truth conditions relative to knowledge and inference (*She must be at home*). These forms play a central role in English discourse, not only for expressing probability but also for negotiating stance, hedging claims, and managing interpersonal alignment. These functions are particularly salient in academic and professional registers (Biber *et al.* 1999; Hyland 1998, 2005). For instance, the contrast between *She must be at home* (strong epistemic commitment) and *She might be at home* (weakened commitment) illustrates how modals calibrate speaker certainty and invite different forms of reader or listener uptake.

From a linguistic perspective, epistemic modals present a number of challenges for L2 learners. First, they are polysemous and multifunctional: the same form may alternate between epistemic and deontic interpretations, with contextual cues determining the intended meaning (*She must be tired* vs. *You must submit the form*). Distinguishing such uses requires advanced sensitivity to discourse context and pragmatic inference (Von Fintel/Gillies 2010). Second, epistemic meanings are often subtle, involving graded probability rather than categorical distinctions, and these

do not always map neatly onto learners' L1 modal systems (Perkins 1983; Bybee *et al.* 1994). This misalignment often leads to negative transfer, such as the overextension of *can* to cover epistemic possibility, or the avoidance of modal verbs in favour of adverbials (*Maybe she is at home*).

Acquisitional evidence confirms that epistemic modality develops later than deontic uses. Bardovi-Harlig (1999) observed that learners typically acquire deontic functions earlier, with epistemic uses remaining underdeveloped or restricted even at advanced proficiency levels. Similarly, corpus-based studies of learner English show underuse of epistemic hedging, resulting in discourse that appears overly categorical or face-threatening (Hyland 1998; Aull/Lancaster 2014). Han (2004) identifies epistemic modals as structures susceptible to stabilisation or at risk of fossilisation, due to both their low perceptual salience and their high pragmatic load, which requires learners to integrate semantics, context, and stance simultaneously.

At the discourse level, epistemic modals tackle the broader category of hedges and boosters, which mediate authorial commitment in both spoken and written communication (Crismore/Farnsworth 1990; Hyland 1998;). Hedges such as *might* and *could* signal tentativeness, thereby opening dialogic space and aligning with the academic value of cautious argumentation. Conversely, epistemic boosters such as *must* and *will* strengthen claims and convey authorial certainty (Biber *et al.* 1999; Hyland/Tse 2004). Effective mastery, therefore, requires not only morphosyntactic control but also pragmatic awareness of how epistemic stance shapes interpersonal and rhetorical effects.

In sum, epistemic modals exemplify the kind of subtle, pragmatically loaded structures that are unlikely to emerge reliably without pedagogical intervention. In a modular framework, they are prime candidates for explicit instruction, supported by authentic communicative practice to foster both accuracy and appropriateness.

### 3.2.9 Discourse markers

Discourse markers (DMs) constitute a heterogeneous class of linguistic items, ranging from single lexemes (*well, so, now*) to multiword expressions (*you know, I mean, in fact*), that function at the interface of syntax, pragmatics, and discourse organisation. Although not contributing directly to propositional meaning, they play a central role in structuring communication, facilitating interaction, and signalling interpersonal stance (Schiffrin 1987; Biber *et al.* 1999; Fraser 1999). As Fraser (2009) notes, DMs also operate as sequential discourse markers, providing cohesion across turns and clauses while also guiding listeners' interpretations. Cuenca (2013) highlights their multifunctionality, emphasising that the same marker may serve rhetorical, sequential, inferential, or ideational functions depending on context.

Discourse markers in English serve as crucial tools for organising, connecting, and signalling relationships between utterances, clauses, and larger stretches of discourse. They include pragmatic markers, which guide interpersonal interaction and indicate

speaker stance (*well, you know, I mean, actually*), and devices like the narrative ones, which structure storytelling or reportive sequences (*then, meanwhile, consequently, eventually*). Their function and rhetorical salience has been extensively documented in oral narratives, where they guide mutual speaker-listener attention and maintain coherence across storytelling phases (Labov/Waletzky 1967; Norrick 2001). González (2004) demonstrated that the use of DMs in narratives is neither arbitrary nor decorative but genre- and context-dependent, serving to signal relevance, indicate inferential links, and facilitate the hearer's interpretation.

From an acquisitional perspective, discourse markers present persistent challenges for L2 learners. Empirical studies show that learners tend to underuse or misapply markers, resulting in disjointed narratives or pragmatically flat interaction (Iglesias Moreno 2001; Müller 2005). The difficulty lies in their form-function mapping: a marker such as *actually* may indicate correction (*Actually, it's Monday*), contrast (*I wanted to go, but actually I stayed home*), or mitigation (*I actually think your idea is interesting*). Mastery requires sensitivity to both linguistic and pragmatic cues, a demanding task in real-time communication. Longitudinal studies reveal that the frequency and range of DM use correlate strongly with perceived fluency (Huang *et al.* 2023; Zhaoyi 2025), with advanced learners displaying greater flexibility and appropriateness. However, even at higher proficiency levels, learners often transfer L1-specific discourse routines, which limits the naturalness of their English output.

Developmental evidence further suggests that comprehension of basic temporal connectors precedes productive mastery of pragmatic markers. Younger and less proficient learners typically employ a restricted repertoire (e.g., *then, and*), while advanced learners experiment with a wider set of pragmatic devices (Morady Moghaddam 2023). Nonetheless, acquisition remains uneven: Nakahama (2018) found that EFL learners produced significantly fewer DMs in narrative retellings than ESL learners, who also received fewer recasts from native interlocutors, suggesting both exposure and interactional context as key variables.

In terms of pedagogy, DMs align with Ellis's (2019, 2024) criteria for inclusion in the structural strand of a modular curriculum: they are communicatively indispensable, pragmatically complex, and resistant to incidental acquisition. While narrative connectors may emerge through repeated task engagement, pragmatic markers often fossilise without explicit support (Han 2024). Within task-supported language teaching (TSLT), DMs can be introduced as by-way structures: learners encounter them naturally in authentic tasks such as storytelling, debates, or collaborative reporting, but teachers provide explicit guidance to highlight their discourse functions. Project-based tasks are particularly effective, as they embed DMs in extended discourse where sequencing, stance-taking, and audience orientation are critical.

Finally, DMs contribute to meta-pragmatic awareness and inclusive pedagogy. By scaffolding tasks at different levels of complexity, learners can gradually expand

their repertoires: beginners may work with basic sequencing devices (*first, then, finally*), while advanced learners engage with pragmatic ones (*you know, actually, I see*) to refine their interpersonal stance. This developmental continuum illustrates how DMs support not only fluency and coherence but also the higher-order strategic competence needed for effective participation in academic, professional, and intercultural communication.

### 3.2.10 Marked word order in English

Canonical English syntax follows a Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) order, which learners typically acquire early and rely on as the unmarked word order in both comprehension and production. However, English also exhibits a range of marked word order phenomena that disrupt this canonical pattern to achieve stylistic, pragmatic, or discourse-related effects. Subject-verb inversion, fronting, clefting, dislocation, and extraposition with dummy *it* are among these phenomena. Such constructions may occur in spoken discourse and are strongly represented in formal registers, academic prose, literary texts, and persuasive texts, where they serve to foreground information and create emphasis (Quirk *et al.* 1985; Biber *et al.* 1999; Huddleston/Pullum 2002).

Marked word orders are often acquired late in second language development, mainly because their functions are subtle and pragmatically conditioned (Odlin 1989; White 1989). Non-canonical word orders present indeed persistent difficulties for L2 learners of English, as they require both syntactic reorganisation and pragmatic re-interpretation. Corpus-based research shows that verb-subject (VS) inversion structures, such as *Here comes the bus* or *Down went the ship*, are rare in learner production and often replaced by canonical subject-verb (SV) patterns, indicating avoidance of marked configurations (Lozano/Mendikoetxea 2010). Experimental evidence confirms that L2 speakers experience processing delays and negative transfer when encountering word orders that diverge from those of their L1 (Erdocia /Laka 2018). Furthermore, prosodic cues have been shown to facilitate the acquisition of canonical word order but not of marked alternatives, suggesting that learners rely on prosodic regularities to infer structural patterns (Saksida 2021). The combination of low perceptual salience, syntactic complexity, and pragmatic specialisation makes marked word orders particularly vulnerable to simplification, avoidance, and eventual fossilisation in interlanguage grammars.

From a curricular perspective, these features exemplify Ellis's (2019, 2024) argument for a modular approach: they are unlikely to be mastered through task-based exposure alone, but they merit explicit attention as part of advanced structural instruction given their importance to enhance the illocutionary effect of propositions, for stylistic sophistication and academic literacy.

#### 3.2.10.1 Subject-verb inversion

Subject-verb inversion following fronted negative or restrictive adverbials (e.g., *Never*

*had she seen such chaos; Only then did he realise his mistake*) is a canonical case of marked word order in English. The construction requires movement of the auxiliary before the subject, triggered by the initial placement of elements such as *never, rarely, scarcely, only, or hardly*. Linguistically, this inversion functions as a discourse-structuring device, signalling emphasis and emphasising the proposition introduced by the adverbial (Greenbaum/Quirk 1990; Huddleston/Pullum 2002). Pragmatically, it is often associated with formal style, rhetorical effect, and heightened stance-taking, rather than everyday conversation (Biber *et al.* 1999).

Inversion phenomena (e.g., subject–auxiliary inversion after negative or restrictive adverbials) are characteristic of formal and written registers more than everyday conversation. They function to highlight information and add rhetorical emphasis. Consequently, classrooms dominated by conversational input may give learners relatively little exposure to these marked patterns, limiting opportunities to notice and internalise the relevant form–function mappings (Quirk *et al.* 1985; Greenbaum/Quirk 1990; Biber *et al.* 1999; Huddleston/Pullum 2002;)

The developmental trajectory suggests that subject–verb inversion is a late-acquired feature, sensitive to both input frequency and cognitive processing demands. Errors typically include auxiliary omission («Never she seen such chaos»), failure to invert («Rarely he has finished on time»), or partial overgeneralisation of inversion to non-licensing contexts («Always does he come late»). These patterns highlight the need for explicit awareness-raising and scaffolded practice.

Reinders and Ellis (2009) investigated the effects of enriched and enhanced input on learners’ acquisition of negative adverbs with subject-verb inversion. Overall, the findings suggest that repeated, unobtrusive exposure can promote implicit learning, whereas explicit noticing instructions tend to offer little additional benefit for complex grammatical forms. Nevertheless, in a modular curriculum, subject-verb inversion may still become a useful candidate for the structural strand. It is stylistically significant, cognitively demanding, and susceptible to stabilisation or at risk of fossilisation, making incidental acquisition through task exposure unlikely (Ellis 2019, 2024). CR activities, such as contrasting canonical and inverted forms (*She had never seen such chaos* vs. *Never had she seen such chaos*), may help learners connect syntactic form with pragmatic and rhetorical function. Project-based activities like speech writing, debates, or literary reinterpretations provide natural opportunities for experimentation, reinforcing both awareness and communicative application.

### 3.2.10.2 Fronting

Fronting refers to the displacement of a constituent, typically an adverbial, object, or complement, from its canonical post-verbal position to the sentence-initial slot, thereby altering the default Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) order of English. Examples include topicalisation (*This book, I really enjoyed*), fronted adverbials (*In the garden*

*stood a tall oak*), and predicative complements (*Happy though she was, she left early*). From a linguistic perspective, fronting functions as a discourse-structuring device, signalling emphasis, topicalisation, contrast, or a shift in information structure (Huddleston/Pullum 2002; Halliday 2014). Unlike inversion, which is often syntactically triggered (e.g., after negatives), fronting is largely pragmatic, allowing speakers and writers to manipulate theme–rheme organisation and foreground elements for rhetorical effect.

In English, the use of fronting is particularly common in literary texts and formal styles, where it contributes to cohesion, thematic progression, and stylistic variation (Greenbaum/Quirk 1990; Biber *et al.* 1999). For example:

- *That problem, we will address tomorrow.*
- *Never before, such chaos had she seen.*

From an acquisitional perspective, fronting represents a late-acquired feature of English interlanguage, used little even by some L1 speakers. Learners whose L1s exhibit flexible word order (e.g., Romance languages with topicalisation or left-dislocation) may attempt early use of fronting but often transfer non-target structures (Odlin 1989). Conversely, learners from rigid SVO languages (e.g., Chinese) may underuse fronting altogether, producing structurally correct but stylistically flat discourse. Empirical studies suggest that learners often fail to exploit fronting for information-structural purposes, relying instead on canonical order and prosody to mark emphasis (Han 2014).

Errors in learner production typically involve word order disruptions («This book enjoyed I»), inappropriate topicalisation of new information, or confusion between obligatory inversion and optional fronting («Never before she had seen such chaos»). These errors reflect both processing constraints (fronting increases syntactic complexity) and the difficulty of mastering its pragmatic motivations.

Corpus-based analyses indicate that advanced speakers of English employ fronting to create cohesion and rhetorical balance in academic and professional discourse (Biber *et al.* 1999). For instance, fronted adverbials (*In conclusion, the data confirm the hypothesis*) provide textual coherence, while topicalisation (*This issue, we cannot ignore*) enhances rhetorical force. Failure to use such devices can mark L2 production as less sophisticated, even when grammatically accurate.

In second language acquisition, fronting is also constrained by noticing and input frequency. Because fronting is relatively infrequent in conversational English, learners may not receive sufficient input to acquire its discourse functions naturally (Schmidt 1990). Explicit awareness-raising, therefore, plays a crucial role: pedagogical tasks can contrast canonical and fronted structures, drawing attention to both their syntactic form and pragmatic effect. For example, CR activities can ask learners to identify differences in emphasis between *We cannot ignore this issue* and *This issue, we cannot ignore*.

Finally, project-based tasks provide a rich context for practising fronting. Learners engaged in debates, academic writing, or persuasive speech simulations can be encouraged to use fronting strategically to identify arguments or establish thematic focus. Such activities seem to lend support to Ellis's (2019, 2024) claim that marked word order may be situated within the structural strand of a modular curriculum: it is advanced, stylistically specialised, and unlikely to be mastered incidentally. Integrating it within meaningful communicative projects maximises both awareness and functional deployment, bridging syntactic complexity and rhetorical competence.

### 3.2.10.3 Dislocation

Dislocation refers to the use of syntactic detachment, whereby a constituent is placed outside its canonical position and reintroduced within the clause by a co-referential element, typically a pronoun. Two main patterns are recognised in English: left-dislocation (*This book, I've read it three times*) and right-dislocation (*I've read it three times, this book*). Both constructions disrupt the default Subject–Verb–Object (SVO) order but serve distinct discourse functions.

From a linguistic perspective, dislocation structures are devices of pragmatic organisation. Left-dislocation tends to function as a topicalisation strategy, focusing on a referent and establishing it as the discourse topic before the predication (Lambrecht 1994). Right-dislocation, by contrast, often serves as a clarifying or emphatic device, either reintroducing a referent for disambiguation or signalling afterthought (Geluykens 1992). Both constructions enhance cohesion by marking topic continuity and easing processing demands for the listener.

Although English employs dislocation less frequently than languages with freer word order (e.g., French or Italian), it remains a salient feature of spoken interaction and colloquial registers (Prince 1997). For example:

- *That movie, I didn't like it at all* (left-dislocation).
- *She's a brilliant teacher, Mary* (right-dislocation).

Corpus studies confirm that dislocation is highly frequent in conversation but rare in academic writing, where topicalisation is more often achieved through fronting or cleft constructions (Biber *et al.* 1999). This distribution underscores its pragmatic orientation: dislocation facilitates listener accessibility, aligning with oral discourse's need for redundancy and explicit topic maintenance (Fox 1987).

From an acquisitional perspective, dislocation poses both opportunities and challenges for L2 learners. Learners from languages with robust dislocation systems (e.g., French, Italian, Spanish) may transfer these structures into English, sometimes resulting in non-target-like overuse (Odlin 1989). Conversely, learners from rigid word order languages (e.g., Chinese, German) often underuse dislocation, relying instead on canonical structures that may sound pragmatically odd or overly formal in conversational English (Schiffrin 1987).

Errors in learner interlanguage often include omission of resumptive pronouns (*This book, I really like*), duplication with incorrect agreement (*My parents, they like she*), or misuse in formal registers where dislocation is stylistically inappropriate. These issues reflect the dual challenge of mastering both the syntactic template and the pragmatic constraints of dislocation.

Research also indicates that comprehension precedes production: learners may correctly interpret dislocated constructions in input but fail to employ them spontaneously in speech (Hawkins 2001). Limited classroom exposure exacerbates this issue, as dislocation appears infrequently in teaching materials, which often privilege formal written registers (Biber *et al.* 1999).

Developmentally, dislocation aligns with Ellis's (2019, 2024) profile of structures requiring explicit focus within a modular curriculum: it is low in frequency, pragmatically specialised, and susceptible to stabilisation or at risk of fossilisation or else avoidance. Raising learners' awareness of dislocation as a conversational strategy can be achieved through CR tasks, such as contrasting canonical and dislocated versions of the same utterance (*I like this book* vs. *This book, I like it*). Project-based activities, such as doing interviews, storytelling, or creating an ad, provide authentic opportunities for practice, as learners must maintain discourse coherence and manage listener attention.

Ultimately, dislocation highlights the intersection of syntax and pragmatics in advanced L2 competence. While not essential for basic communication, it is a useful resource for achieving naturalistic fluency and discourse appropriateness in informal spoken English. Its inclusion in the structural strand of a modular curriculum ensures that learners are exposed to the full stylistic repertoire of English, bridging structural accuracy and pragmatic sophistication.

#### 3.2.10.4 Cleft sentences

Cleft sentences are a key strategy of marked word order in English, used to manage information structure by highlighting one element while downplaying others. Canonical cleft constructions take the form *It + be + X + that-clause*, as in *It was John that broke the vase*, where focus is placed on *John* rather than on the action itself. Variants include *it*-clefts, *wh*-clefts (or pseudo-clefts: *What she wanted was a new book*), and reversed pseudo-clefts (*A new book was what she wanted*) (Quirk *et al.* 1985; Huddleston/Pullum 2002). These constructions do not alter propositional meaning but reconfigure the packaging of information, making them pragmatic rather than purely syntactic devices (Lambrecht 1994).

From a linguistic perspective, clefts function at the junction of syntax, semantics, and discourse. They allow speakers to highlight contrastive or corrective information, to manage given versus new distinctions, or to shape the utterance to meet speaker and listener expectations about which part of the message should be highlighted. For instance, the sentence *It was only yesterday that I received the letter* signals a corrective

emphasis that would be absent in the canonical *I received the letter only yesterday*. Corpus-based research confirms their role in both spoken and written registers, with *it*-clefts occurring more frequently in spoken interaction, often in corrective or contrastive contexts, while pseudo-clefts are more typical of formal writing, where they serve to structure arguments or highlight thematic progression (Collins 1991; Biber *et al.* 1999).

For L2 learners, clefts present several acquisitional challenges. First, they require control of complex syntactic embedding, including the manipulation of relative clauses (*that/who clauses*) and the appropriate use of expletive *it*. Second, their communicative function (emphasis and information packaging) requires pragmatic sensitivity that may be underdeveloped in learner interlanguage. Research suggests that learners frequently avoid clefting altogether, opting instead for unmarked SVO order and thereby producing grammatically correct but stylistically flat discourse (Odlin 1989). When attempted, errors typically involve omission of the complementiser («It was John broke the vase»), misplacement of the focused constituent, or overuse of clefts in contexts where they sound redundant or pragmatically unnatural (Biber *et al.* 1999; Götz 2013).

Acquisition studies confirm the late emergence of clefts in learner production. Hawkins (2001) argues that because clefts encode pragmatic contrasts in syntactic form, their acquisition requires not only syntactic competence but also discourse-pragmatic awareness. Moreover, given their relative infrequency and low perceptual salience in input compared to canonical declaratives, learners may lack sufficient opportunities to notice and internalise their discourse functions (Schmidt 1990; Biber *et al.* 1999; Götz 2013).

Pedagogically, cleft constructions align closely with Ellis's (2019, 2024) modular framework. They are stylistically sophisticated, pragmatically loaded, and developmentally late. Explicit instruction can raise awareness of their syntactic structure and pragmatic effect, while task-supported activities (e.g., debates, argumentative writing, or literary analysis) provide authentic contexts for their use. For example, tasks that require corrective emphasis (*It wasn't Peter who proposed the idea, it was Maria*) or rhetorical highlighting (*What this experiment demonstrates is the importance of controlled variables*) naturally elicit clefts and reinforce their communicative value. By situating them within project-based tasks, teachers can encourage learners to experiment with these forms, balancing structural accuracy with rhetorical force.

Cleft sentences exemplify how advanced syntactic resources are recruited for discourse-pragmatic purposes. Their acquisition is constrained not only by morphosyntactic complexity but also by the subtlety of their communicative functions. As such, they provide a paradigmatic case for targeted structural instruction within a modular curriculum, ensuring that learners develop not only grammatical competence but also the stylistic and pragmatic sophistication required for advanced

academic and professional registers.

### 3.2.10.5 Extraposition (*Dummy It*)

Extraposition with *dummy it* represents another noteworthy case of marked word order in English, where the canonical subject position is filled by an expletive *it* and the notional subject is moved to the end of the clause. For example, the unmarked *That she arrived late surprised everyone* is commonly restructured as *It surprised everyone that she arrived late*. This transformation enhances processing efficiency by avoiding heavy or complex subjects in clause-initial position, while also creating stylistic variation and foregrounding evaluative stance (Greenbaum/Quirk 1990; Huddleston/Pullum 2002).

The construction has several subtypes, including:

- Extraposed subject clauses: *It is clear that she misunderstood the instructions.*
- Extraposed infinitival clauses: *It was difficult to solve the problem.*
- Extraposed evaluative constructions: *It seems that he is unwilling to cooperate.*

These structures do not alter propositional meaning but redistribute information for cognitive and pragmatic reasons. They often carry evaluative or epistemic overtones, serving to present statements as more objective or detached, a feature particularly valued in academic and professional registers (Biber *et al.* 1999).

Extraposition is linked to information structure: heavy subjects are displaced to the end of the clause, and the expletive *it* occupies subject position, thereby maintaining canonical SVO syntax. Cross-linguistically, not all languages use an expletive strategy. Many allow null subjects or tolerate heavy subjects clause-initially. This typological variation explains why L2 learners frequently struggle with extraposition. Learners whose L1s lack dummy pronouns (e.g., Chinese, Japanese) tend either to retain clausal subjects («That she arrived late surprised everyone») or to omit expletive *it*, producing ungrammatical forms («Is important to study hard») (Odlin 1989).

Acquisition studies confirm that extraposition develops relatively late in learner interlanguage. Gass and Selinker (2008) note that learners tend to overgeneralise canonical clause-initial subjects before gradually internalising the stylistic and pragmatic functions of dummy *it*. Error analyses also reveal persistent difficulties with subject–verb agreement (*It are necessary to...*) and with distinguishing extraposition from impersonal *it* (e.g., *It is raining*), leading to overextension or avoidance. *Dummy it* constructions may be susceptible to stabilisation or at risk of fossilisation because of their low perceptual salience and the availability of simpler alternative structures (Han 2014).

From a discourse perspective, extraposition contributes to evaluative stance and register appropriateness. Academic prose, for instance, frequently employs extraposed constructions (*It is evident that...*, *It is likely that...*) to signal hedging or epistemic caution (Hyland 1998; Charles 2007). In professional contexts, extraposition allows

writers to emphasise judgments or recommendations while de-emphasising the agent (*It is recommended that the policy be revised*), thus aligning with institutional conventions of objectivity and formality.

CR tasks could highlight contrasts between canonical and extraposed variants, while project-based activities, such as report writing, academic presentations, or policy debates, provide authentic contexts where extraposition is not only natural but also rhetorically effective. For instance, students preparing scientific abstracts may be guided to employ extraposed evaluatives (*It is important to note that...*) to mirror disciplinary norms.

In brief, extraposition with dummy *it* epitomises the interface of syntax, discourse, and pragmatics. Its acquisition requires learners to integrate structural reordering, register awareness, and rhetorical strategy. While not essential for basic communication, its mastery is a hallmark of advanced proficiency, enabling learners to participate fully in academic and professional discourse communities.

In sum, the discussion of structural strands within modular curricula has highlighted how certain linguistic features, whether due to low salience, developmental constraints, risk of fossilisation, or low frequency and limited availability in the input, require support alongside task-based learning. What emerges is not a prescriptive syllabus but a flexible, diagnostic orientation that responds to learners' actual developmental trajectories and communicative needs. Building on these premises, the next chapter turns from theoretical considerations to methodology, to examine how a modular project design can be situated within real educational contexts and operationalised methodologically.



## 4. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMING AND CONTEXT

### 4.1 PREMISES AND EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS

The design of the projects presented in the next three chapters reflects the principles of Ellis’s modular curriculum (2019, 2024). In the proposed project work, individual tasks contribute to the communicative dimension, while the overarching project provides cohesion. Their propedeutic sequencing sustains participation, since learners know that each step contributes towards an ultimate outcome, the final macro-task. Within this framework, a task-based strand serves as the primary engine for developing implicit knowledge through communicative activity, while a task-supported strand addresses residual or persistent linguistic difficulties through explicit intervention. Project work provided a motivating alternative to textbook-driven routines or lectures centred on textual analysis and slide presentation. Through projects, learners were offered opportunities to use their resources in meaningful, communicative contexts.

The experiments were conducted at the *Liceo Scientifico delle Scienze Applicate* of IIS Sarrocchi in Siena. In Italy, *licei* are part of the *scuola secondaria di secondo grado*, the upper secondary school system, which spans five years and hosts students roughly between the ages of 14 and 19. These schools are intended to prepare students primarily for university education, offering a rigorous curriculum with both general and specialised tracks. Classes are quite heterogeneous in terms of learning profiles including some students with special needs. For an overview of specific educational needs and language learning, see Staggini 2024, 2025.

There are several types of *liceo*, each emphasising different disciplinary domains. For instance, the *Liceo Scientifico* focuses on mathematics, physics, the natural sciences, and increasingly on scientific and technological laboratory work alongside humanistic subjects. The *Liceo Linguistico* places greater emphasis on foreign languages, language literature, and cultural studies. The *Liceo Classico* comprises classical studies such as Latin and Ancient Greek, while other tracks (*Liceo delle Scienze Applicate*, *Liceo Artistico*, *Liceo delle Scienze Umane*, *Liceo Coreutico Musicale*, etc.) center on applied science, visual arts, social sciences, or performance and

musical studies.

The curriculum includes a mix of common foundational subjects (Italian language/literature, history, mathematics, English as a foreign language, etc.) plus the specialised subjects according to the *liceo* track. At the end of the fifth year, all students take the *esame di Stato* (State Examination, also called *Maturità*), which grants eligibility for university admission.

In the *biennio* (years 1 and 2), the curriculum has a generalist orientation, and English language teaching emphasises communicative competence, vocabulary expansion, and control of basic grammatical structures through everyday registers. By contrast, in the *triennio* (years 3, 4, and 5), the focus gradually shifts towards more complex skills and students are expected to process literary and historical texts and to develop argumentative registers.

In this context, project work as a macro-task framework enabled the modular approach to be tailored flexibly. While individual students inevitably displayed different levels of competence, sometimes above or below the class average, the reference levels can be broadly approximated as follows: A2+ → B1 target level in the *biennio*, and B1 → B2 target level in the *triennio*. In the *triennio*, project-based modular curricula were designed for learners' engagement with both language and cultural content (e.g., medieval literature and history) through creative tasks that demanded critical engagement as well as communicative authenticity. Overall, institutional requirements were accommodated while communicative authenticity and learner motivation were maintained.

The projects reported here were not isolated experiments but the outcome of pilots conducted over a number of years, progressively refined through iterative cycles and informed by my dual perspective as SLA researcher and practising English teacher.

## 4.2 RATIONALE FOR MODULAR PROJECT WORK

My conviction from the outset was that task-based pedagogy offered a theoretically principled route to meaningful learning, yet the realities of school frequently constrained this ambition. Two obstacles were especially significant. The first was the pervasive reliance on textbooks that largely perpetuated the PPP paradigm, often accompanied by only a superficial communicative frame. Such materials risk demotivating learners, since the activities rarely engaged them in genuine communication. The second obstacle was the increasing weight of certification. While international qualifications provide recognition of competence aligned with the CEFR (Council of Europe 2020, extended version of 2001), their dominance in curricular planning has tended to narrow teachers' focus, shifting attention away from holistic, intercultural education towards exam preparation (Petrocelli 2020, 2021). This pressure not only risks sidelining weaker learners but also undermines the inclusive and collaborative ethos central to contemporary education.

Against this background, both in secondary schools and later in higher education, I sought ways to sustain motivation and enable all learners to participate meaningfully. As a matter of fact, the flexibility of TBLT has often proven effective in the secondary school context: Morgana (2023), for example, successfully adopted technology-mediated TBLT in Italian secondary schools. In the university context, the flexibility of TBLT has also been exploited. Rodríguez-Peñarroja (2022) carried out one study where TBLT was integrated with Project-Based Learning (PBL) in an English-for-Specific-Purposes class, using Youtube for the multimodal input. The finding showed a strong correlation between students' motivation in the task-based project and their performance.

Rather than conceiving of errors solely as deficits, I tried to highlight the communicative resources students already possessed and to encourage them to trust their linguistic repertoires. The guiding principle was to let learners experience language as a medium for achieving tangible outcomes (e.g., solving problems, creating products) before gradually attending to accuracy through explicit intervention. Two principles guided the structural strand: first, the selective targeting of forms identified by Ellis (2019, 2024) as resistant to incidental acquisition, susceptible to stabilisation or at risk of fossilisation (e.g., past tense, third person -s, articles, passives, conditionals, reported speech, discourse markers, marked word order); second, a flexible response to emergent difficulties observed during task performance.

My earliest experiments were modest: task activities adapted from textbook resource packs, which nonetheless had a noticeable impact on learner engagement. This prompted me to design classroom tournaments, where successive tasks accumulated points towards prizes. From there, the idea of larger-scale project work took shape. A key turning point was an interdisciplinary project, supported by external funding, which involved CLIL practices and STEAM integration (Petrocelli *et al.* 2022). The resulting “news broadcast” project demonstrated the motivational potential of project-based TBLT and enforced the ongoing systematic experimentation.

### 4.3 TASK-BASED AND STRUCTURE-BASED PHASES

Initially, I grappled with the tension between task-based and structure-focused teaching. While TBLT, with its focus on complexity, accuracy, and fluency (CAF), provided a strong basis for communicative growth (Ellis/Barkhuizen 2005), institutional requirements to teach predetermined target structures or content, especially in preparation for certification exams, risked narrowing instruction to externally imposed objectives. Task-Supported Language Teaching (TSLT) offered a partial compromise. However, when learners perceived that the “real purpose” of a task was primarily to practice grammar, their engagement waned.

My solution was to experiment with separating strands: dedicating specific lessons to task-based activities and others to form-focused work, and Ellis's (2019)

reinforcement of the value of modular curriculum lent it strong theoretical legitimacy. The model relieved me of the burden of seeing task-based and structure-based work as incompatible. Instead, it validated their coexistence in parallel strands, offering a principled reconciliation of classroom practice.

Within the projects, task-based phases (implicit knowledge-oriented) involved meaning-focused activities that aimed to meet the criteria of TBLT (Ellis 2003b; Long 2015): a primary focus on meaning, a communicative gap, reliance on learners' own resources, and a non-linguistic outcome. Attention to form occurred only incidentally, through reactive focus on form with the use of corrective feedback. CF refers to the responses teachers or interlocutors provide to learners' errors to guide them toward more target-like production. Research identifies several CF strategies: recasts, repetition, clarification requests, explicit correction, elicitation, and paralinguistic cues (Ellis 2009b). Among these, recasts have attracted particular attention within interactionist research (Long 1996; Lyster/Ranta 1997). Their effectiveness, however, varies according to how they are realised: prosody, intonation, and the degree of reformulation influence whether they are perceived as implicit or explicit (Mackey/Philp 1998). As Ellis (2009b) notes, teachers must exercise pragmatic and pragmalinguistic judgement, balancing communicative flow with sufficient salience to promote noticing and uptake. Scholars disagree on which types of feedback are most effective. Long (2006) highlights recasts as implicit and unobtrusive, whereas Lyster (2004) and Mackey and Philp (1998) stress that output-prompting strategies better promote learner control and awareness. Meta-analyses indicate that both implicit and explicit CF can support acquisition, though explicit, metalinguistic feedback often yields stronger short-term gains (Russell/Spada 2006). Still, Ellis (2009b) cautions that no single type of corrective feedback will be the most effective for all learners in all contexts and that its impact depends on the context and the learner's developmental readiness. In my own pedagogical practice, I have sought to reflect this principled flexibility, although generally my most frequent tendency was to intervene by way of recasts. My feedback choices were responsive to learners' needs and developmental stages, aiming to make target forms salient without interrupting communicative flow, where sustaining interactional continuity was a key priority.

By contrast, structure-based phases (explicit knowledge-oriented) aimed to foster awareness of pre-selected features, typically susceptible to stabilisation or at risk of fossilisation, or else scrutinised during task performance. These activities retained communicative authenticity but targeted explicit knowledge through CR tasks, metalinguistic feedback, or structured noticing.

The structure-based strand was not limited to a single format of grammar instruction but included a range of explicit FFI activities. Task-supported activities, situational grammar exercises and CR tasks prevailed, but space was given also to more traditional PPP lessons, as well as metalinguistic analysis or other forms of explicit

attention to language that emerged at different stages of the modules. This variety reflected the flexible and responsive nature of the design, which sought to address different learning goals while maintaining a communicative orientation. To secure coverage of non-salient features while sustaining interaction, I alternated between genuine focused tasks, where the linguistic target was hidden but likely to occur, and situational grammar exercises, in which target forms were pre-specified and their use was controlled. Focused tasks preserved a primary focus on meaning and an outcome not defined in linguistic terms, whereas situational exercises prioritised accurate display of selected forms within a communicative frame. These structure-based steps all included a final post-activity focus on forms to make emerging regularities explicit.

To wrap up, the methodological design of this research views language learning as an iterative and context-sensitive process. Learners develop implicit and explicit knowledge through repeated cycles of task performance, reflection, and feedback, while teachers adapt instruction according to classroom realities. The study employed a classroom-oriented, design-based approach inspired by the principles of TBLT (Ellis 2003b, 2005), FFI (Fotos/Nassaji 2007), and the Modular Curriculum model (Ellis 2019, 2024). Rather than testing hypotheses under controlled conditions, the project developed through cycles of design, classroom implementation, and reflection. The overall aim of the experience was to bridge research-based principles and everyday teaching, showing how informed design can foster both communicative engagement and linguistic accuracy.

The research followed an action-oriented and reflective approach (Erlam/Tolosa 2022), in which theory and practice inform each other. The three project modules, *Ad Challenge*, *SuperQuark*, and *World Recipes*, were designed as flexible learning environments combining communicative tasks with targeted form-focused work. Each module aimed for a concrete, non-linguistic outcome, so that grammar practice could also serve meaningful communication and sustain students' motivation (Dörnyei/Ushioda 2011; Erlam/Philp/Feick 2021). The linguistic foci reported in the designs did not result from abstract prescriptions but from longitudinal classroom practice. Over several years, I kept systematic field notes on recurrent learner difficulties, communicative breakdowns, and progress. The features presented here are therefore illustrative of the most salient and persistent challenges across projects, while always adaptable to the needs of specific classes.

#### 4.4 SEQUENCING AND TIMING

A further methodological concern was sequencing the strands. Ellis (2019) outlines three possible models: parallel (both strands from the start), structure-first (explicit knowledge before tasks), and what I will refer to as “Option 3”, that is, task-first (fluency and implicit learning before structural intervention). Nevertheless, Ellis

explicitly favours Option 3, which he considers the most compatible with how second language proficiency develops naturally. In this model, grammar instruction follows rather than precedes communicative activity: learners first build a lexical and experiential basis through task-based work, during which they may also develop an awareness of gaps in their language knowledge that makes them readier to learn explicitly, and only later benefit from targeted form-focused intervention.

Following this rationale, in my designs, each project began with a meaning-focused task and concluded with a further task-based activity in which those forms were recycled in authentic use. This organisation placed task-based learning at the core of instruction, while treating explicit form-focused work as a responsive support. In *World Recipes* and *Superquark project*, task-based and structure-based phases alternate systematically. In *The Ad Challenge*, the sequence begins with two task-based phases, and thereafter, the design adopts a regular alternation, typically involving two task-based phases followed by one structure-based phase, before returning to task-based work again. This cyclical pattern maintains the primacy of communicative activity while ensuring that explicit intervention was systematically integrated at key points.

Timing, likewise, was flexible. While a 50-minute lesson usually formed the minimum unit for a strand, some activities required two or three sessions, particularly in the structural strand, for consolidation. Overall, project length varied from a few sessions to several weeks, especially when culminating in performances or video presentations. The principle was that time should serve learning, not the other way around.

#### 4.5 TOWARDS IMPLEMENTATION

Taken together, these methodological choices show that a modular curriculum can function not as a rigid formula but as a context-sensitive framework, adaptable across educational levels and disciplines. By embedding tasks within broader projects, the designs balanced implicit and explicit orientations while also addressing cross-curricular goals such as collaboration, intercultural awareness, and disciplinary learning.

The following chapters present each project in turn, with its methodological rationale and reflections on implementation. The sequence moves progressively from designs for the first up to the third year of high school, and illustrates not only the scalability but also the adaptability of project-based modular work across age groups and competence levels.

## 5. THE AD CHALLENGE PROJECT

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION TO *THE AD CHALLENGE*

*The Ad Challenge* has generally been promoted and implemented with first-year classes in the *Liceo delle Scienze Applicate*. At the outset, learners were typically positioned at an A2+ level moving towards B1. Over the years, however, the average level of the classes has gradually risen, largely due to the influence of non-formal learning and the increased exposure to English outside the classroom. This trend has been documented in recent studies on Italian university students (see Pavese *et al.* 2025), but it can reasonably be extended to upper-secondary contexts and, more broadly, to Italian and European youth.

This is the first project presented in this book, and it is perhaps the one that most fully encapsulates the idea that motivated me to adopt a modular approach to language teaching. From the very beginning, my goal was to design and implement projects where the primary focus lay in communication and implicit knowledge, with explicit attention to form introduced only at points where it is pedagogically justified. This means that learners first experience language as a tool for achieving a concrete outcome (whether brainstorming a new product, developing a profile, or pitching an advert) before the teacher highlights the linguistic features that can refine their performance.

The rationale behind this sequencing is directly drawn from Ellis's (2019) Option 3. Fluency and implicit knowledge are prioritised in initial stages, and explicit instruction follows reactively, targeting forms that have emerged as problematic. In *The Ad Challenge*, this principle takes the shape of cycles. Each cycle begins with two task-based activities, designed to stimulate creativity, negotiation, and problem-solving. Once learners have produced language under communicative pressure, a structure-based activity provides scaffolding and accuracy-oriented work. The explicit stage does not replace the task but supports it, ensuring that structures such as comparatives, superlatives, imperatives, and conditionals are noticed, practised, and connected to persuasive functions in advertising. In this way, each cycle operates as a loop: communication comes first, followed by focus on form, with learning

fueled by the interplay between the two.

The following synopsis presents the project sequence in detail, showing how each step combines communicative goals with selective attention to form, and how the cycles progressively guide learners from invention to public performance.

### 5.1.1 SYNOPSIS OF THE MODULAR DESIGN FOR THE *THE AD CHALLENGE* PROJECT

#### *Cycle 1 (Steps 1-3: Ideation and product description)*

##### Step 1: Brainstorming fantastic products

Task-based phase (implicit knowledge-oriented)

- Task-based activity: Opinion-gap task. Each student thinks of a “fantastic” product (e.g., flying shoes, homework pen, colour-changing t-shirt) and proposes it to the group. Groups negotiate and select the most innovative and sellable idea.
- Implicit form-focused instruction: Teacher incidentally recasts L1-transfer errors with impersonal subjects (e.g., *is a pen* → *it’s a pen*).
- Non-linguistic outcome: One invented product per group.

##### Step 2: Product development

Task-based phase (implicit knowledge-oriented)

- Task-based activity: Groups refine the product’s identity, including its unique selling point (USP), target customers, and price.
- Implicit form-focused instruction: Corrective feedback on comparatives/superlatives and modality (e.g., *more cheap* → *cheaper*; *with this product you save time* → *with this product you can spare time*).
- Non-linguistic outcome: Visual or tangible product, with profile board and key features.

##### Step 3: Guessing game with comparatives and conditionals

Structure-based phase (explicit knowledge-oriented)

- Supporting activity: Guessing game. One learner holds a hidden picture of an object/food item. Peers try to guess by making statements through stems prepared by the teacher (*If this falls... it breaks/doesn’t break/bounces; It is heavier than... / lighter than...*). The holder responds until the object is identified.
- Explicit form-focused instruction: Controlled use of zero/first conditionals and comparatives/superlatives. Teacher feedback on verb endings, article choice, and comparative morphology.
- Non-linguistic outcome: Correct identification of the hidden objects; groups keep score of successful guesses.

## *Cycle 2 (Steps 4-6: Promotion of the product)*

### Step 4: Jigsaw: Matching products and slogans

Task-based phase (implicit knowledge-oriented)

- Task-based activity: Groups match visuals of products with advertising slogans.
- Implicit form-focused instruction: Emergent discourse features (e.g., imperatives, catchy parallelism, rhythm).
- Non-linguistic outcome: Completed jigsaw; extra point for the fastest group, boosting motivation.

### Step 5: Listening challenge: radio ads

Task-based phase (implicit knowledge-oriented)

- Task-based activity: Groups listen to short audio ads without visuals and guess which product is being advertised. They record their guess on a piece of paper before the answers are revealed.
- Implicit form-focused instruction: Teacher notes emergent issues of listening comprehension and stress patterns, and intervenes with forms of corrective feedback.
- Non-linguistic outcome: Points added to group “scoreboard” for correct guesses.

### Step 6: Persuasive language in advertising

Structure-based phase (explicit knowledge-oriented)

- Supporting activity: Groups complete cloze versions of authentic/adapted slogans (imperatives, comparatives/superlatives, plurals, conditionals). Then they categorise each slogan by persuasive strategy.
- Explicit form-focused instruction: Teacher highlights how each structure creates a persuasive effect and corrects morphological errors (*more cheap* → *cheaper*; *it break* → *it breaks*; *two mans* → *two men*).
- Non-linguistic outcome: A visual “strategy board” displaying slogans under three headings: imperatives, comparatives/superlatives, conditionals.

## *Cycle 3 (Steps 7-9: Evaluation and final production)*

### Step 7: Evaluation grid design

Task-based phase (implicit knowledge-oriented)

- Task-based activity: In whole-class mode, groups co-construct an evaluation grid to assess “Best Product” and “Best Slogan”. They negotiate at least two criteria for each category (e.g., originality, clarity, persuasiveness).
- Implicit form-focused instruction: Recasts on functional language for negotiation (e.g., *We must have two criteria* → *We should have at least two criteria*).
- Non-linguistic outcome: Class-created evaluation grid to be used in final

voting.

### Step 8: Video commercial production

Task-based phase (implicit knowledge-oriented)

- Task-based activity: Groups draft, rehearse, and record their video commercials, integrating product description, persuasive language, and slogan.
- Implicit form-focused instruction: Teacher monitors for recurrent issues (intonation, stress, modal choice) but defers correction until post-filming.
- Non-linguistic outcome: Group video commercials.

### Step 9: Public screening and final vote

Task-based phase (implicit knowledge-oriented)

- Task-based activity: Groups present their commercials to the whole class. Using the evaluation grid, peers vote for “Best Product” and “Best Slogan.”
- Implicit form-focused instruction: Teacher provides delayed feedback on systematic issues (conditionals, SVO in questions, 3rd person -s).
- Non-linguistic outcome: Whole-class event with winners announced; motivational boost reinforced by symbolic prizes or certificates.

## 5.2 STEP 1: BRAINSTORMING FANTASTIC PRODUCTS

The first phase of *The Ad Challenge* project introduced learners to the creative dimension of advertising by inviting them to brainstorm “fantastic” products that could later become the subject of a commercial. Each student was asked to think of an imaginative item and present their idea to the group. Many ideas were elicited, including *a homework pen that does exercises by itself*, *a colour-changing t-shirt*, and *flying shoes*. The activity was framed as an opinion-gap task, since groups had to negotiate and ultimately agree on which product was the most original and marketable. The instructive rationale here was to tap into the motivational power of creativity, which has been shown to sustain learner engagement and stimulate extended output (Dörnyei/Ushioda 2021). At the same time, the negotiation process created opportunities for learners to clarify meaning, request repetition, and reformulate their ideas, all of which align with Long’s (1996) interaction hypothesis.

As is typical at the A2+/B1 level, learners relied heavily on existing lexical and grammatical resources, often producing hybrid or non-target-like forms that nonetheless communicated meaning. For instance, one learner described their product as «is a pen that writes alone», while another presented «a bag who makes your books light». Such productions are instances of two recurring interlanguage tendencies: the omission of the expletive subject (*is a pen* → *it’s a pen*) and the overextension of relative pronouns (*who* for *that* or *which*). Rather than interrupting the task flow, the teacher responded with implicit recasts, reformulating these utterances as «It’s a pen that does your homework by itself» or «a bag that makes your books lighter». These

subtle interventions exemplify implicit form-focused instruction, drawing attention to forms (Ellis 2019) without shifting the activity into an explicitly structural mode.

The task also provided fertile ground for lexical innovation. Learners experimented with English derivational resources, producing hybrids like «book-lightener bag». While not fully target-like, these neologisms reflect creative use of morphological rules and confirm Swain's (2005) output hypothesis, which stresses that pushing learners to produce language beyond their current comfort zone can stimulate the noticing of gaps and generate new hypotheses about form-meaning mappings.

On several occasions, peers initiated clarification sequences, as in «What is a light book bag?», prompting the original speaker to negotiate meaning («A bag that makes books more light... lighter»). These episodes illustrate how task design naturally activates peer scaffolding, reinforcing both lexical development and morphosyntactic accuracy.

The non-linguistic outcome of Step 1 was the selection of a single product per group, often accompanied by a quick sketch or a verbal pitch. Beyond the artefact itself, however, the real gain was pedagogical: learners experienced that imaginative communication demands precision as well as creativity. In other words, Step 1 laid the foundation for the dual orientation of the project: language as a medium for innovation and innovation as a context for language development.

### 5.3 STEP 2: PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT

The second phase of *The Ad Challenge* shifted the focus from brainstorming to design, requiring groups to refine their chosen product and articulate a coherent identity. This involved specifying a unique selling point (USP), identifying target customers, and determining an appropriate price range. The aim of this step was to extend learners' engagement from purely imaginative ideation to market-oriented reasoning, thereby creating a reasoning-gap task that demanded justification and consensus. For instance, a group that had invented “flying shoe” debated whether the USP should emphasise speed («They help you go more fast than a car») or environmental sustainability («They don't use petrol, so better for nature»). Such exchanges illustrate how task-based design naturally prompts negotiation of meaning (Pica 1994) as learners attempt to align linguistic form with communicative intent.

Learner production at this stage frequently revealed reliance on developing morphosyntactic structures such as comparatives and superlatives. Typical utterances included «This pen is more cheap than the other pens» or «Our product is the most easy for students». These forms are highly prone to L1 transfer and morphological overgeneralisation. Teacher intervention therefore took the form of recasts (Lyster/Ranta 1997), gently reformulating such attempts as «cheaper» or «the easiest». Similarly, learners sometimes struggled with modal constructions when highlighting benefits, producing sentences like «With this product you spare time» instead of «you

can save time». Again, these reformulations were provided implicitly, preserving the communicative flow while drawing attention to target-like forms.

The design of this step also encouraged lexical expansion through the need to describe abstract concepts such as convenience, efficiency, or innovation. Some learners creatively extended their repertoire, producing phrases like «It's more helpful than a smartphone» or «It is the most comfortable shoes in the world». Others relied on literal translations from Italian («more better», «the most cheapest»), which, though non-target-like, nonetheless signalled developing control over comparative morphology. These productions illustrate interlanguage as a dynamic system (Selinker 1972), where errors are not simply deficits but evidence of rule-formation in progress.

The non-linguistic outcome of this phase was a product profile board, often created through visual artefacts such as drawings, collages, or digital mock-ups, accompanied by short written descriptions. These boards made the products tangible, supporting later stages of script-writing and video production. Beyond their immediate function, however, they also anchored the learners' linguistic experimentation: attaching sentences to visual representations of the product reinforced the interplay between words and images in persuasive communication (Hyland 2005). In short, Step 2 consolidated the project's task-based foundation by requiring learners to translate creative ideas into market-oriented profiles, while simultaneously offering opportunities for implicit form-focused instruction that targeted mid-developmental structures, such as comparatives, superlatives, and modals.

#### 5.4 STEP 3: GUESSING GAME WITH COMPARATIVES AND CONDITIONALS

The third phase of *The Ad Challenge* deliberately shifted the educational focus from implicit to explicit form-focused work, introducing a situational grammar exercise designed to aid the consolidation of key grammatical structures. Learners engaged in a guessing game in which one student held a hidden picture of an everyday object or food item, while the others attempted to identify it by asking questions based on sentence stems provided on cue cards. These included both zero and first conditional frames («If this falls, it breaks / it doesn't break / it bounces») and comparative structures («It is heavier than a book / lighter than a book / as heavy as a book»). By constraining the interaction in this way, the activity guaranteed repetitive, accurate practice of forms, namely comparatives, superlatives, and conditional constructions.

Student production revealed typical interlanguage features of learners at A2+/B1 level. For instance, one learner confidently produced «It is more cheap than a phone», which a peer quickly negotiated into «cheaper». Such episodes confirm that explicit scaffolding embedded in playful, goal-oriented activities can create opportunities for learners to experiment with morphosyntax while remaining motivated by the competitive element of the task. The teacher's role was to recycle these moments into

brief accuracy-focused discussions, ensuring that learners noticed contrasts between their output and target-like alternatives (Schmidt 1990).

Crucially, the non-linguistic outcome of this phase was not linguistic accuracy per se but the successful identification of the hidden objects. Groups kept score of their correct guesses, and the competitive dynamic was always met with considerable enthusiasm. For example, after several rounds, one team celebrated having guessed «an egg» correctly after deducing from the clues «If this falls, it breaks» and «It is lighter than a book». This outcome preserved the integrity of the activity as a communicative game rather than a grammar drill, aligning with the principle that explicit instruction should support, rather than dominate, language learning.

Step 3 exemplifies how structure-based phases can be used strategically within a modular curriculum by providing structured opportunities to practise problematic forms without derailing the communicative purpose of the activity and maintaining a balance between accuracy and fluency.

#### 5.5 STEP 4: MATCHING PRODUCTS AND SLOGANS

The fourth phase of *The Ad Challenge* inaugurated the promotion cycle, moving learners from product design to the persuasive language of advertising. To scaffold this transition, groups engaged in a jigsaw activity that required them to match a series of product visuals with corresponding slogans. The rationale behind this design was to expose learners to authentic or semi-authentic advertising discourse before they attempted to produce their own, thereby providing an input-based orientation that would sensitise them to genre-specific conventions (Swales 1990; Bhatia 2004). The jigsaw element ensured that information was distributed among group members, obliging them to share clues and negotiate agreement, a process that naturally generated opportunities for interactional correction and clarification (Ellis 2003b).

Examples of learner production illustrate both creativity and interlanguage negotiation. When faced with the slogan «Taste the difference», one group initially paired it with an image of running shoes, leading to puzzled reactions from peers: «But shoes... you cannot taste». After laughter and discussion, the group corrected itself and matched the slogan to a food product, noting aloud the pragmatic importance of metaphor in advertising language. Another slogan, «The future in your hands», was first associated with a pen and later with a mobile phone, prompting debate over which interpretation better aligned with the implied promise of innovation. These exchanges highlight how the task fostered not only lexical recognition but also pragmatic reasoning about the fit between words and visuals.

At the level of form-focused instruction, the teacher intervened implicitly by drawing attention to recurring patterns in the input. Imperatives such as «Just do it» or «Discover the taste of summer» were noted as a salient feature of English

advertising, pragmatically licensed by the genre despite their otherwise face-threatening potential (Brown/Levinson 1987). Learners also observed rhythmic and alliterative devices («Big, bold, better»), which contributed to memorability and audience appeal. The teacher recasts addressed occasional slips when learners tried to reproduce such patterns in English, for example, reformulating «Make experience new flavour» into «Experience a new flavour». In this way, Step 4 provided implicit form-focused instruction without shifting the activity into an overt grammar lesson.

The non-linguistic outcome was the successful completion of the jigsaw, with groups earning points toward the final competition for “best product” and “the best advertisement”. The competitive dimension proved especially motivating for teenagers, who invested considerable energy in being the first to complete the matching task correctly. As one learner exclaimed, «We win this one. We are faster!», the activity not only reinforced linguistic noticing but also stimulated a sense of ownership and investment in the project’s cumulative challenge. In sum, Step 4 functioned as a bridge between imaginative product creation and persuasive discourse, grounding learners’ output in exposure to authentic models and highlighting linguistic devices that would later enrich their own advertising scripts.

## 5.6 STEP 5: LISTENING CHALLENGE: RADIO ADS

The fifth phase of *The Ad Challenge* expanded the input base by shifting from visual to auditory stimuli, asking learners to engage with short radio advertisements. Each group listened to a series of audio clips and was required to infer the product being promoted, writing down their guess before the answers were revealed. This activity served multiple pedagogical purposes. First, it foregrounded listening comprehension in authentic registers, a known challenge at A2+/B1 levels, where learners often rely on visual cues or context to compensate for gaps in auditory processing (Field 2008). Second, it created an information-gap task that resulted in a tangible outcome: the correct identification of the advertised product, with points accruing to each group’s scoreboard. The competitive dimension, once again, helped sustain attention and motivation, encouraging learners to listen more carefully to details of intonation, rhythm, and key lexical items.

Learner responses illustrated both the difficulty and the value of this listening challenge. For example, when hearing the slogan «Smooth taste, bold flavour», one group confidently wrote «coffee», while another proposed «chocolate». The ensuing discussion revealed how lexical cues were interpreted differently and how learners relied on background knowledge and collocational clues to anchor their guesses. In another case, a learner misheard “medallion” as “Italian”, leading to humorous peer correction but also underscoring the role of connected speech and stress patterns in comprehension. Such episodes align with Vandergrift and Goh’s (2012) argument that metacognitive awareness, reflecting on what one has understood, why, and how,

can be fostered through post-listening discussions.

At the level of form-focused instruction, the teacher intervened minimally, providing short recasts or repetition with marked intonation when misperceptions were linked to phonological features. For instance, learners who interpreted *savings account* as *seven account* were offered a corrected repetition that emphasised stress on the first syllable of *savings*. Similarly, when a group produced «he drink energy drink» in explaining their guess, the teacher recast as «he drinks an energy drink», implicitly reinforcing third-person singular -s, another mid-developmental feature prone to omission (Ellis 2019). These interventions kept the activity firmly within the implicit domain. Language remained a tool for meaning-making, but attention was momentarily drawn to form where it clearly impeded comprehension or intelligibility.

The non-linguistic outcome of this phase was the scoreboard itself, with groups proudly recording their cumulative points after each correct guess. Beyond gamification, this outcome symbolised incremental achievement, reinforcing the sense that language tasks contributed to a larger shared challenge. In classroom feedback, learners often commented on the excitement of “beating” another group by recognising a product first, a reaction that highlights how competition, when framed positively, can enhance engagement and deepen processing of input (Dörnyei 2001). Step 5 thus consolidated the promotional cycle by immersing learners in authentic auditory genres of advertising, sharpening their sensitivity to prosodic features, and helping them take the next step into script-writing.

## 5.7 STEP 6: PERSUASIVE LANGUAGE IN ADVERTISING

This stage moved learners from a receptive awareness of advertising discourse to a more analytic engagement with its underlying persuasive strategies. Groups were provided with cloze versions of authentic or slightly adapted slogans where the key linguistic item had been removed. Examples included gaps for imperatives (*\_\_\_ do it!*), comparatives (*Better \_\_\_ ever!*), plurals (*Not one knife, but two \_\_\_ for 3 pounds only!*) or conditionals (*If you \_\_\_ it today, you'll save 20%*). The structural focus shifted each time according to learners' needs. With the best groups, at times most or all structures were presented together, as a form of revision. Learners worked collaboratively to supply the missing words, thereby drawing on both their linguistic knowledge and their awareness of rhetorical conventions. Once reconstructed, the slogans were sorted into the categories imperatives, comparatives/superlatives, and conditionals, so that groups could visualise how each grammatical form aligned with a persuasive technique.

The explicit focus at this stage targeted accuracy in morphology and syntax, which, for learners at an A2+/B1 level, often remains unstable. Typical problems included incorrect comparative forms (e.g., «more cheap» instead of *cheaper*), missing third-person -s («it break» instead of *it breaks*), or inaccuracies with plural formation,

such as omission in «two picture» instead of *two pictures*, or overgeneralisation in «two knives» instead of *two knives*, or «two mans» instead of *two men*. Misapplied conditional structures were also frequent (e.g., «If you will buy...» instead of *If you buy...*). Teacher feedback was deliberately explicit, clarifying both the correct forms and their persuasive effects. For instance, imperatives were discussed as devices that create urgency («Buy now!»), comparatives as tools for establishing superiority («Better than the rest»), and conditionals as strategies for projecting benefits («If you join today, you'll get a free trial»). This alignment between form and function helped learners appreciate not only the grammatical correctness of their output but also the pragmatic force of their linguistic choices.

The non-linguistic outcome of this activity was the production of a visual “strategy board”, where groups displayed their categorised slogans under the three headings. Beyond functioning as an immediate task product, the board served as a collective reference point for later script-writing, allowing learners to revisit the persuasive resources they had analysed. In practice, this tangible artefact also reinforced a sense of ownership and collaboration, as each group contributed examples to a shared resource. More broadly, the step exemplified how explicit, accuracy-oriented work can be embedded meaningfully within a task cycle without disrupting communicative engagement, consistent with Ellis’s (2019) modular framework.

## 5.8 STEP 7: EVALUATION GRID DESIGN

The seventh step shifted the focus from creative production to critical evaluation, asking learners to co-construct the very framework through which their final outputs would later be judged. In whole-class mode, groups negotiated the criteria for two categories: “Best Product” and “Best Slogan”. This served as an opinion-gap activity where students had to justify why certain dimensions (e.g., originality, clarity, persuasiveness, feasibility) should be included and how many criteria were necessary. For instance, one learner proposed, «We must have three criteria for the product», to which another responded, «Two, because three is too much». Such exchanges not only required decision-making but also pushed learners toward more precise modality in argumentation. The teacher recasts gently guided these discussions, reformulating categorical imperatives («We must have two/three criteria») into more collaborative suggestions («We should have at least two criteria»).

Italian learners in particular benefitted from corrective prompts on modal verbs and quantifiers, as they often transferred L1 patterns such as *We must have two criteria* or *We make two criteria*. In contrast, successful examples of learner uptake included the use of hedged consensus-building expressions like «Maybe we could add the price as another criterion» and «I think originality is more important than price». These instances demonstrated learners’ growing repertoire of pragmatic strategies for group decision-making.

The non-linguistic outcome was a collaboratively designed evaluation grid, a tangible artefact that crystallised the class's shared standards for judging both products and slogans. This outcome not only provided a framework for subsequent peer assessment but also enhanced learners' sense of ownership, as the criteria were not imposed externally but generated through their own negotiation and reasoning.

## 5.9 STEP 8: VIDEO COMMERCIAL PRODUCTION

The eighth step represented the culmination of the creative cycle, as groups moved from preparatory activities into the full production of their video commercials. Having already refined their product profiles, experimented with persuasive strategies, and designed their slogans, learners were now asked to integrate these elements into a coherent, multimodal performance. The task-based strand required groups to draft, rehearse, and finally record their advertisements, a process that blended script-writing with improvisation. Crucially, the commercials were not simply linguistic exercises but attempts to persuade an imagined audience of peers, consumers, or even "investors". This authenticity of purpose provided a strong communicative drive, motivating learners to take risks with language and creativity.

During rehearsals, recurrent patterns of interlanguage surfaced. For instance, one learner enthusiastically declared, «If you buy our shoes, you are more fast than a cheetah». This prompted both laughter and a natural opportunity for feedback on comparative morphology (*faster* rather than «more fast»). Another group attempted to elevate their product's appeal with the line, «This pen is unique, very special, very good», which illustrated learners' tendency to pile up basic intensifiers instead of adopting idiomatic collocations (*signature pen, exclusive design*). Similarly, Italian transfer effects occasionally led to missing auxiliaries («He go to shop now for buy it») or awkward use of modals («You must buy this or you lose everything»), which the teacher noted for post-task reflection.

Yet positive learner productions also emerged. One group, advertising a "smart backpack", created a catchy conditional slogan: «If you carry it, it carries you», cleverly exploiting symmetry and rhythm. Another group used humour and direct address: «Tired of boring homework? With our magic eraser, you can delete mistakes and stress». These examples showed how learners were beginning to appropriate the persuasive strategies modelled in earlier steps, combining imperatives, conditionals, and evaluative adjectives in imaginative ways.

From a pedagogical perspective, this stage underscored the importance of fluency and performance. The teacher adopted a light-touch during filming, monitoring for recurrent issues in pronunciation, intonation, and stress, as well as systematic grammatical patterns (e.g., third-person -s, article omission), but postponing correction until after the task. This ensured that communicative flow was not disrupted and that learners experienced language as a resource for achieving a

meaningful outcome rather than as an obstacle.

The non-linguistic outcome of this step was the set of group video commercials themselves. Beyond their didactic function, these artefacts held tangible value: they could be replayed, shared, and even compared with authentic advertising models. More importantly, the act of producing a public-facing product generated a strong sense of ownership and pride, with students often volunteering to re-record segments to improve delivery. In this sense, the commercials crystallised not only learners' linguistic progress but also their collaborative creativity, highlighting how project-based task design integrates affective, cognitive, and communicative dimensions of SLA.

### 5.10 STEP 9: PUBLIC SCREENING AND FINAL VOTE

The final stage of *The Ad Challenge* brought all strands of the project together in a screening of all the student-made commercials. Each group presented its video to the class, with peers using the collaboratively designed evaluation grid (Step 7) to judge the “Best Product” and “Best Slogan”. The voting created a genuine sense of anticipation, since learners had not only invested in their own products but also shared responsibility for critically assessing those of their classmates. This evaluative component mirrored authentic advertising contexts, where campaigns are constantly measured against audience reception and market feedback.

From an SLA perspective, this phase prioritised fluency, multimodal communication, and pragmatic effectiveness over micro-level accuracy. Students' discourse showed how far they had internalised structures practised in earlier stages: some groups confidently employed imperatives in their slogans («Try it today!»), while others creatively mobilised conditionals («If you buy the SmartPen, your homework will never be late again») or comparatives («Our shoes are lighter than air, faster than trainers»). Although minor slips persisted, such as article omissions («Buy amazing shoes») or subject-verb agreement («Now, she present our new product»), these did not obstruct communication and were addressed later in reflective feedback sessions.

The competitive dimension proved particularly motivating. Learners responded enthusiastically when their videos were shown, applauding peers' creativity and laughing at humorous details, such as exaggerated voice-overs or comic sound effects. One group, for instance, used over-the-top intonation to parody traditional TV ads, which their classmates praised as «really like the real ones». This atmosphere of peer recognition and playful rivalry amplified engagement, confirming research on the socio-affective benefits of public performance and project-based assessment (Stoller 2006; Dörnyei/Ushioda 2021). This aligns with Ushioda's (2013) view of motivation as a socially mediated and relational construct. The learners' engagement was not merely individual but co-constructed through interaction, humour, and mutual appreciation, factors that amplify both affective investment and sustained effort in

project-based language learning.

The non-linguistic outcome of this step was the collective experience of a screening event, complete with peer voting and the awarding of symbolic “Best inventors” and “Best promoters” titles. Beyond the artefacts themselves, students reported feeling proud that their products and commercials had been received as entertaining, persuasive, and credible. The combination of collaborative creation, public exhibition, and evaluative closure thus offered an authentic rehearsal of real-world communication, while consolidating the linguistic and pragmatic gains developed across the entire project.

### 5.11 CONCLUDING REMARKS ON *THE AD CHALLENGE* PROJECT

The design of *The Ad Challenge* tried to align with Ellis’s (2019) Option 3 principle. Each cycle was deliberately structured to begin with a task-based phase, in which learners engaged in meaning-focused, fluency-oriented activities that stimulated creativity, negotiation, and problem-solving. These initial stages gave primacy to implicit knowledge, allowing learners to draw on their existing interlanguage resources and to experience the communicative gap between what they wanted to express and what their repertoire allowed them to produce.

Only after this experiential stage did the cycle move into a structure-based phase, where explicit form-focused instruction was introduced in response to the difficulties that had emerged, or to the project’s specific communicative needs. This sequencing reflects the logic of Option 3, because, rather than pre-emptively front-loading accuracy work, the design allowed learners first to build communicative fluency or at least communicative self-confidence, and then discover their own linguistic limits, which provided a rationale and readiness for more accuracy-oriented interventions.

By embedding structure-based activities at the end of each cycle, the project ensured that explicit knowledge did not interrupt the communicative drive of the task. Instead, it consolidated it, sensitising learners to forms that were both recurrent and pedagogically significant (e.g., comparatives/superlatives, conditionals, imperatives in advertising discourse). This pattern was then reset with the next cycle: another task-based phase opening new communicative space, followed by structure-based refinement. In this way, each cycle operated as a self-contained loop of fluency–accuracy integration, while the overall project culminated in a final communicative macro-task (video production and public screening) that was free from explicit form intervention, thereby preserving authenticity and motivation.

Each cycle offered distinctive gains. In the early stages, opinion-gap and reasoning-gap tasks encouraged creativity and negotiation of meaning, while reactive feedback targeted developmental problem areas such as impersonal subjects («is a pen» → *it’s a pen*), and comparative morphology («more cheap» → *cheaper*). In the middle cycle, structure-based activities such as slogan cloze exercises allowed learners to explore

how imperatives, conditionals, and comparatives function persuasively, with explicit guidance preventing fossilisation. Finally, the evaluative and performative stages brought these elements together, enabling students to produce multimodal artefacts that were authentic, entertaining, and socially meaningful.

The project also highlighted the socio-affective benefits of modular task design. Learners reported increased motivation from the competitive elements (points, voting, awards), while the public screening fostered pride, ownership, and a collaborative spirit. Importantly, errors and slips that emerged under communicative pressure were treated not as failures but as diagnostic opportunities for future instruction, reinforcing the idea that explicit knowledge can enhance noticing without undermining fluency (Ellis *et al.* 2009; DeKeyser 2025), and can aid the consolidation of implicit learning processes, which remain a priority.

From a methodological perspective, the adaptability of *The Ad Challenge* deserves emphasis. Thanks to its cyclical architecture and the possibility of calibrating both linguistic targets and task complexity, the project can be successfully implemented across a wide range of contexts, class levels, and learner ages. At the lower-secondary or upper-primary level, product ideas and slogans can be simplified, with linguistic scaffolding oriented toward the early acquisition of structures. At higher levels, by contrast, the project can be enriched with more sophisticated persuasive strategies (e.g., passive voice, rhetorical questions, clefting) and extended into cross-curricular collaborations. Moreover, one of the most revealing outcomes was the adaptability of the structural checklist in light of the project's communicative demands. Comparatives and superlatives, for instance, proved far more central than anticipated: the very design of the project required learners to weigh and select among competing options, which naturally elicited comparative language. Their prominence in learner output confirmed the importance of treating the checklist as a flexible, diagnostic tool rather than a fixed syllabus. A similar insight emerged with imperatives, and their persuasive use in advertising. Taken together, these findings underscore how the modular design enabled the checklist to evolve dynamically. Instead of prescribing a static set of forms, it accommodated the linguistic and pragmatic needs that surfaced through task performance, thereby aligning structural attention with communicative purpose.

Its greatest resonance, however, is arguably with teenagers in the early years of upper-secondary education (14-15 years old). At this stage, many learners are consolidating their communicative autonomy (A2+/B1), while also experiencing strong socio-affective needs, including the desire to bond, compete, and build a collective identity within the classroom. *The Ad Challenge* offers a structured yet playful environment where these developmental needs intersect with language learning, fostering conditions for sustained engagement and memorable learning goals, a dynamic consistent with Erlam, Philp and Feick's (2021) observation that adolescent learners respond best to modules combining clear goals and scaffolding,

as well as tangible, interaction-driven outcomes.

Ultimately, the project's design is inherently interdisciplinary. Beyond English, subjects such as ICT or Technology can support the video-production process, while Italian or other L1 courses can reinforce the rhetorical and promotional strategies that are later transferred into English. This cross-pollination not only broadens the educational value of the project but also demonstrates to learners the real-world relevance of language as a vehicle for creativity, persuasion, and collaboration across domains.

In sum, *The Ad Challenge* validates the potential of modular curricula to foster both linguistic development and learner engagement. By drawing on the naturally persuasive and creative character of advertising, the project provided an authentic context in which learners could experiment with language, refine their repertoire of functional structures, and experience the impact of their communication on a real audience.



## 6. THE *WORLD RECIPES* PROJECT

### 6.1 INTRODUCTION TO *WORLD RECIPES*

The *World Recipes* project was implemented in second-year classes of an Italian upper-secondary school, with learners at estimated proficiency levels of A2+/B1 on the CEFR scale (Council of Europe 2020). The central macro-task required learners to prepare a recipe (possibly a culturally unfamiliar one) and to present the process in English, combining both the culinary product and a video-recorded oral presentation as tangible outcomes.

In line with Ellis's characterisation of tasks (2003b), the project valued meaning-focused communication, the negotiation of information and opinions, and clearly defined non-linguistic outcomes. Students, working in small heterogeneous groups, assumed responsibility for planning, preparing, and presenting their recipes, while also ensuring equitable participation through minimum speaking requirements, a minimum time of 40 seconds each in the final video. Preparation included the independent exploration of lexical resources, with a focus on pronunciation through the use of online dictionaries offering geographical differences. Crucially, oral production was to be spontaneous: reading from scripts was explicitly prohibited, and inaccuracy was monitored but accepted where communicative clarity was preserved.

In what follows, the module will be analysed in terms of its sequential organisation, beginning with input-oriented tasks that introduced the thematic and lexical field, followed by progressively more demanding reasoning- and opinion-gap activities, and culminating in the production of the macro-task. Regarding the sequencing of implicit- and explicit-oriented activities, in the case of *World Recipes*, task-based phases are regularly interspersed with structure-based phases, ensuring that fluency and creativity are continuously balanced with opportunities for explicit language work. This sequencing also allowed me to experiment with a different progression compared to other projects, while still consistently privileging a task-based first approach.

The following synopsis outlines each step of the project, while the subsequent narrative paragraphs provide a more detailed account of how the phases unfolded in

practice.

### 6.1.1 Synopsis of the modular design for World Recipes project

#### Step 1: Initial diagnostic task (recipe brainstorming)

Task-based phase (implicit knowledge-oriented)

- Task-based activity: Brainstorming of culturally distant/unknown recipes.
- Implicit Form-Focused Instruction: Teacher observation of imperatives (e.g., *Cut the onions*); noticing overuse and modelling more polite or mitigated alternatives through recasts.
- Non-linguistic outcome: Class shortlist of recipes.

#### Step 2: Ingredients and English varieties

Structure-based phase (explicit knowledge-oriented)

- Supporting activity: Correcting mismatched ingredient cards.
- Explicit Form-Focused Instruction: IPA and lexical variants (*aubergine/eggplant*), *a/an/the/-*.
- Non-linguistic outcome: Ingredient and lexical boards

#### Step 3: Feasibility and constraints evaluation

Task-based phase (implicit knowledge-oriented)

- Task-based activity: Groups negotiated recipe feasibility against constraints (time, availability, dietary restrictions).
- Implicit Form-Focused Instruction: Modal verbs (*must not* vs. *cannot*) emerged naturally; the teacher used recasts/clarifications
- Non-linguistic outcome: Feasible, inclusive recipe version

#### Step 4: Visual storyboarding and sequencing

Structure-based phase (explicit knowledge-oriented)

- Supporting activity: Constructing flowcharts/storyboards
- Explicit Form-Focused Instruction: Sequencing markers (*first, next, then, finally*), passive voice (simple present)
- Non-linguistic outcome: Completed visual storyboard with each picture captioned by group-generated sentences containing (a) one sequencing marker in every phase, and (b) at least two passive constructions along the storyboard (only in the present simple)

#### Step 5: Audition task (role allocation)

Task-based phase (implicit knowledge-oriented)

- Task-based activity: Groups rehearsed and allocated roles.
- Implicit Form-Focused Instruction: Teacher feedback on target-like utterances (e.g., third person -s; passives)
- Non-linguistic outcome: Final role assignment in groups

### Step 6: Sequencing the scrambled recipe video

Structure-based phase (explicit knowledge-oriented)

- Supporting activity: Watching a scrambled recipe video and reconstructing the correct sequence.
- Explicit Form-Focused Instruction: Discourse markers, regular/irregular past tense forms.
- Non-linguistic outcome: Reconstructed storyboard of the recipe (ordered frames + narration of the chef's actions).

### Step 7: Final macro-task (video production and presentation)

Task-based phase (implicit knowledge-oriented)

- Task-based activity: Groups produced and presented recipe videos.
- Implicit Form-Focused Instruction: Teacher noted errors for later remediation; main focus, fluency.
- Non-linguistic outcome: Tangible products (video + dish)

## 6.2 STEP 1: INITIAL BRAINSTORMING AND RECIPE SELECTION

The opening phase of the project was designed to stimulate learners' curiosity and to establish the communicative need that would drive the following sequence of tasks. Working in small groups, learners were asked to brainstorm possible recipes to prepare, with the condition that these recipes should be relatively unknown to their peers and, if possible, culturally distant from their everyday culinary repertoire. The activity culminated in the production of a short list of candidate recipes, written on a shared board and subsequently voted on by the class. The outcome was thus non-linguistic and tangible, consistent with Ellis's (2003b) definition of a pedagogical task, where language functions primarily as the medium to achieve a practical goal.

From an SLA perspective, this first step prioritised fluency and lexical activation. The communicative demands created both information gaps (different members contributed different culinary knowledge) and opinion gaps (groups negotiated which recipe to adopt), thereby generating authentic opportunities for meaning-focused interaction.

The brainstorming task also served a crucial diagnostic function for the structural strand of the modular curriculum (Ellis 2019, 2024). As learners discussed recipes, recurrent interlanguage patterns emerged. One telling example concerned the expression of procedural instructions. From the very first exchange, learners demonstrated a strong tendency to rely on bare imperatives in their procedural discourse. This preference is not surprising, as the imperative form in English is morphologically unmarked, requiring no subject agreement or tense marking, and therefore highly accessible at lower proficiency levels. However, its overuse during the recipe exchange produced discourse that was sometimes monotonous and pragmatically inappropriate. More specifically, learners frequently produced

unmodulated sequences such as «Cut the onions. Put the oil. Add the salt», which conveyed instructions effectively but lacked natural variation or mitigation. In some instances, attempts to transfer pragmatic options from Italian resulted in non-target-like outcomes. For example, when learners intended to express optionality (*Potete aggiungere altra cannella se volete*), they produced translations such as «You put more cinnamon if you want». While grammatically intelligible, such utterances fail to capture the pragmatic nuance of English hedges or modalised suggestions (e.g., *You can add more cinnamon if you like* or *You might want to add a little more cinnamon*).

This phenomenon illustrates a recurrent challenge noted in second language acquisition: structurally straightforward forms may still be problematic when their use is conditioned by pragmatic or sociolinguistic factors (Ellis 2019; Bardovi-Harlig 2013). Moreover, if left unaddressed, the systematic overreliance on imperatives risks becoming entrenched in learners' interlanguage, leading to a fossilised register of directive speech acts characterised by excessive directness (Han 2014).

As the discussion unfolded, these instances provided opportunities for reactive focus on form, with the teacher intervening minimally through recasts and clarification requests. For example, when one learner said «Add sugar», the teacher reformulated with «You could add some sugar here» or «It might be a good idea to add sugar at this point», prompting them to notice how modalised or hedged alternatives conveyed a more polite stance. Brief peer discussion reinforced these contrasts, as learners themselves began to comment on which formulations sounded more natural or socially appropriate.

In this way, the focus on form emerged organically from the communicative task, without interrupting its flow. The primacy of meaning was preserved, while learners received timely exposure to pragmatic alternatives that broadened their repertoire beyond the bare imperative. The intervention thus exemplified how task-based work can generate authentic opportunities for noticing and refinement, fostering both fluency and pragmatic sophistication.

### 6.3 STEP 2: LEXIS AND PRONUNCIATION OF INGREDIENTS

In the second step of the project, groups were given sets of ingredient picture cards accompanied by written English labels, some of which were deliberately mismatched. Their task was to identify and correct the mismatches, ultimately producing a completed ingredient board. This visual resource could subsequently be used to work on the group's presentation of their recipe in the final video.

This activity operationalised key SLA mechanisms. First, it promoted noticing and noticing-the-gap (Schmidt 1990). For instance, when one group mislabelled *coriander* as *parsley*, peers intervened with corrective feedback, leading to a negotiation exchange that required attention to semantic distinctions. Such interactional episodes embody the principle that negotiation of meaning plays a central role in driving acquisition

(Long 1996; Pica 2006).

Second, the activity engaged phonological working memory and chunking processes (N. Ellis 1996), as learners rehearsed new lexical items aloud. Learners' preparation for the recipe task also revealed systematic phonological challenges when dealing with culturally unfamiliar lexical items. For instance, words such as ginger and zucchini were frequently realised in non-target-like forms reflecting transfer from Italian phonotactics. Ginger was often pronounced with [i] replacing the English near-high lax vowel and with the final -er rendered as [er], mirroring Italian orthographic conventions. Similarly, zucchini was typically produced with affrication of the initial consonant cluster and shortening of the long vowel [i:], or occasionally with a final [e], reflecting Italian morphological patterns. These deviations did not generally compromise intelligibility, but they reduced the authenticity of oral production and highlighted the importance of paying explicit attention to segmental features during preparatory stages. Left unchecked, such forms would also risk fossilisation (N. Ellis 2006).

At the same time, the ingredient boards created the opportunity to focus explicitly on article use. Learners compared the weak form of the before consonants with its strong form before vowels. They were led by the teacher to focus on differences between a and an depending on phonetic environment (e.g., a tomato vs. an aubergine). They also discussed cases where no article was required at all, as with uncountable nouns such as rice or water, and explored how these could be quantified through partitive constructions (a bowl of rice, a glass of water).

To address these issues, the teacher introduced a short CR activity. Learners were shown how online dictionaries provide IPA transcriptions and audio recordings in different varieties of English. They then listened to paired variants (aubergine vs. *eggplant*, *courgette* vs. *zucchini*) and created a regional lexical list displayed in the classroom. In doing so, they not only refined their pronunciation but also developed an awareness of lexical variation across English varieties. The activity was subsequently extended to articles and the phonetic environment. Students compared the weak form of *the* /ðə/ before consonant sounds with its strong variant /ði:/ before vowels (e.g., *the flour* /ðə 'fla:/ vs. *the eggs* \* /ði: 'egz/). They also examined the alternation between *a* /ə/ and *an* /æn/, noting cases where phonology overrides orthography (*an hour* /ən 'aʊə/ but *a utensil* /ə /'ju:t(ə)nsəl/). Finally, they reflected on uncountable nouns, realising that no article is required in many food and drink items in English, for instance *bread* /brɛd/, *rice* /raɪs/ or *water* /'wɔ:tə/. While in other languages these nouns may be treated as countable, in English they are typically uncountable and appear without *a/an*. Learners discussed how these items can nevertheless be quantified through partitives, e.g. *a piece of bread*, *a bowl of rice*, *a glass of water*.

Students' discourse showed how they were beginning to internalise these structures: some confidently applied the phonetic alternation (*a tomato* /ə tə'mɑ:təʊ/ vs. *an aubergine* /ən 'əʊbəʒi:n/), while others experimented with American variants

(*a tomato* /ə tə'meɪrɒʊ/ or *zucchini* /zu:'ki:ni/). Particularly interesting were the comments linking Italian and English morphology, as learners noted that *zucchini* «sounded plural» to their ears, unlike *courgette*. Although minor slips persisted, such as using the weak form /ðə/ before vowels (*the eggs* pronounced /ðə egz/ rather than /ði: egz/), these did not obstruct communication.

Through this multi-layered exploration, students came to see that pronunciation, grammar, and lexis are not discrete domains but interdependent aspects of communicative competence.

From a theoretical standpoint, this episode illustrates the weak-interface position (Ellis 1994, 2006): explicit knowledge (in this case, phonological awareness and sociolinguistic variation) was not expected to lead directly to implicit competence but to enhance learners' ability to notice and to process input more effectively. Thus, the structural activity introduced here did not replace the communicative task but functioned as a scaffold to prevent entrenched forms.

In summary, Step 2 demonstrated how the modular curriculum enables reactive structural interventions without compromising the project's communicative orientation. The outcome (the ingredient board and lexical map) remained non-linguistic, while the structural strand ensured that recurrent errors were addressed systematically, in line with Ellis's (2019, 2024) proposal for a modular approach to curriculum design.

#### 6.4 STEP 3: FEASIBILITY PLANNING AND CONSTRAINT NEGOTIATION

The third phase of the project introduced an additional layer of cognitive and communicative complexity. Having selected and labelled their recipes, groups were asked to consider the practical feasibility of preparing them. Constraints included time, availability of ingredients, dietary restrictions (e.g., vegetarian or religious considerations), and access to necessary tools. Each group had to evaluate its chosen recipe against these criteria, negotiate adaptations, and record the results in a constraint checklist, which served as a task.

From the perspective of task typology, this stage clearly exemplified a reasoning-gap activity (Prabhu 1987). Learners had to derive new information on whether the recipe was feasible in the given conditions by combining background knowledge with contextual constraints. The need to reach a consensus created authentic opportunities for negotiation, in line with Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis, which posits that language acquisition is fostered when learners must modify their output in response to communication breakdowns.

The communicative demands of this task also stimulated higher-order reasoning and the integration of linguistic and non-linguistic resources. For example, one group initially proposed a recipe for sushi rolls but realised that sourcing fresh fish and specialised tools was impractical. Through negotiation, they adapted the recipe

to a vegetarian version and one with canned tuna, demonstrating not only pragmatic decision-making but also engagement with English as the medium of problem-solving, although from time to time, learners slightly slipped into Italian, and the teacher had to ask them to get back to the use of English.

This phase once again revealed interlanguage patterns that highlighted potential areas of difficulty. Learners frequently relied on overgeneralised or inappropriate modal constructions when discussing feasibility. Statements such as «We must not use pork because it is not possible» or «Apart rice you can use potatoes» illustrated two distinct tendencies: (1) an overextension of deontic *must* in contexts where modals *cannot* or *may not* would have been more accurate, and (2) simplification of structures, with prepositions omitted or misplaced.

In these cases, the teacher responded to the learners' formulations in the flow of the task with brief recasts and clarification requests, encouraging them to adjust their formulations without interrupting the communication. For example, when a group used «must not» to signal factual impossibility, the teacher reformulated with «cannot» in a confirming tone, prompting the learners to notice the semantic difference. Similarly, omissions such as «Apart rice» were gently reformulated («Apart from rice...»), allowing students to integrate the correction seamlessly into their negotiation.

These interventions preserved the primacy of the communicative task, deciding on an inclusive and feasible recipe, while at the same time sensitising learners to subtle but recurrent issues of modality and cohesion. In this way, accuracy was treated not as an isolated grammatical target but as an element of credibility and clarity.

## 6.5 STEP 4: PROCEDURE BUILDING THROUGH FLOWCHARTS AND STORYBOARDS

This step marked an important shift towards a structure-based phase with an explicit orientation, where the completion of a visual storyboard served as the concrete outcome around which focused attention on form could be organised. Learners were asked to order a set of picture cards representing the stages of a recipe and to caption each image with sentences collaboratively produced in their groups. These captions were not free additions: they had to contain one sequencing marker in every phase and, across the storyboard, at least two examples of the passive voice in the present simple. The non-linguistic outcome and the linguistic targets were therefore inseparably connected. A storyboard without sequencing markers would be incomplete; a storyboard without passives would be judged stylistically inadequate for the genre of recipes. In this way, the task itself constrained learners to mobilise specific grammatical resources, which is the defining principle of TSLT.

The activity was carefully scaffolded in advance, though in a deliberately asymmetrical manner. On the one hand, the passive voice was introduced explicitly before the activity. Learners had received a short but focused explanation of its form

in the present simple, together with controlled exercises that gave them the chance to manipulate basic examples such as *The carrots are washed*, *The meat is cut into pieces*, and *The pasta is cooked in salted water*. The choice of the present simple was not incidental: it corresponds to the default tense of recipes and instruction manuals, and it avoids overloading learners at this level with more complex morphological forms such as the present continuous or the perfect passive. On the other hand, sequencing markers were treated differently. Instead of a grammar lesson on cohesive devices, I displayed a few items on the board (*first, then, next, finally, to begin with, at this stage, subsequently, afterwards, eventually, at last, in the final step*) and left space for discovery, experimentation and negotiation. Once the markers had been briefly displayed, I removed them from sight so as to encourage students to reflect on the forms and attempt to retain them. Learners had been informed of this procedure in advance, so that the removal was not perceived as an arbitrary restriction. This approach was intended to channel learners' attention towards variation and appropriacy without reducing the activity to a mechanical exercise.

The classroom dynamic that followed was usually rich in evidence of interlanguage. Several groups started by falling back on repetitive and formulaic structures: «First we cut the carrots. Then we cut the potatoes. Then we add the salt. Then we eat». This sequence, while grammatically correct, produced a monotonous rhythm and employed a limited repertoire of linkers. While sequencing adverbials such as *first* and *then* are relatively salient and often acquired early, their systematic and flexible deployment across extended discourse is considerably more challenging (Schiffrin 1987; Fraser 2009). Moreover, as shown in the example, sometimes persistent difficulties with article usage in context also emerged (White 1991; Ionin *et al.* 2004; N. Ellis 2006; Shirai 2009).

Other groups attempted to stretch beyond the models but produced hybrid forms such as «In the next we cook the rice» or «At the finish we serve». These attempts are revealing: they show how learners were experimenting with cohesive devices, albeit without full control over prepositional patterns or idiomatic phrasing. Similarly, the passive voice often appeared in unstable configurations: «Next is cooked the rice» was one group's attempt, reflecting awareness of the need for passivisation but a lack of certainty about English word order.

The moments of negotiation within groups were perhaps the most pedagogically valuable. At one table, an exchange unfolded as follows:

A: «We fry the onions.»

B: «No, better: *the onions are fried.*»

A: «Ah, like recipe book.»

C: «Yes, because it's not *we*, it's general.»

This brief dialogue encapsulates the rationale of the activity. Without the requirement to produce captions, Student A might never have reformulated spontaneously; yet the necessity to finalise a storyboard made the choice unavoidable.

Student B's intervention demonstrates not only knowledge of the passive but also sensitivity to genre conventions, while Student C's metalinguistic remark connects the grammatical form to its pragmatic function. Such moments exemplify how collaborative activities generate conditions for noticing, comparison and hypothesis-testing, which, according to Schmidt (1990) and Gass and Mackey (2007), are essential to the development of second language competence.

Teacher intervention was woven into this process, never detached from the activity. When a group presented «We boil the water. We put the pasta», I reformulated it on the board as «First the water is boiled, then the pasta is added». The contrast was discussed not as a grammar drill but as a resource for improving the quality of the storyboard. Other reformulations included «The chicken is cut into small pieces» instead of «We cut the chicken», or «The vegetables are washed carefully» rather than «We wash the vegetables carefully». These interventions illustrated the morphosyntactic pattern of the passive while reinforcing its stylistic appropriacy. Importantly, they were always embedded in the immediate need to complete the storyboard, thereby avoiding the decontextualisation that often reduces the pedagogical impact of explicit instruction.

The final displays around the classroom walls provided further opportunities for reflection. As learners compared their storyboards, comments emerged spontaneously: «You used only 'then', we used 'after that' and 'finally'», or «Better to write 'is cooked' here». In this way, peer evaluation became another vector for noticing and consolidation. The material dimension of the artefacts (the arrows, the captions, the laminated pictures) gave concreteness to the linguistic contrasts, making them visible and discussable in a way that oral production alone would not have allowed.

According to Ellis (2019, 2024), explicit instruction plays a facilitative role when it is embedded within communicative activity and when learners perceive a functional need for the targeted forms. The storyboard task achieved precisely this: sequencing markers and passives became salient not because they were highlighted in isolation, but because the task demanded their use for successful completion. The principle of *blocking* (see Ellis 2006) also helps to explain why these interventions were necessary: without guidance, learners' attention risked being monopolised by lexical items (names of ingredients, verbs of action), thereby overshadowing more subtle grammatical devices. By requiring captions with both linkers and passives, the activity counteracted this tendency and broadened the learners' attentional focus.

The storyboards, complete with captions, were not merely decorative products but embodied the intersection of linguistic and non-linguistic goals. They demonstrated that fluency, creativity and collaboration could be maintained while simultaneously pushing learners towards greater morphosyntactic accuracy. Most importantly, they showed that linguistic forms, often perceived as peripheral or avoidable, can be made essential through specifically constructed activities.

## 6.6 STEP 5: MICRO-REHEARSAL AND PEER QUESTIONING

The fifth stage marked a transition from planning to oral rehearsal, offering learners their first opportunity to simulate the performative dimension of the project. Rather than rehearsing as an undifferentiated group, each team was asked to stage an internal “audition”, in which members presented specific roles: one acted as the main chef responsible for guiding the procedure, another introduced the type of recipe, while a third presented the ingredients, and so on. This division of labour ensured that every learner contributed a distinct component to the performance while also creating a natural sense of accountability and ownership.

The auditions generated a concrete non-linguistic outcome: each group collectively decided who would take on which role in the final video, based on the persuasiveness and clarity demonstrated during the rehearsal. This outcome not only scaffolded preparation for the macro-task but also mirrored real-world project dynamics, where individual strengths are matched to specific responsibilities. Interestingly, when the project was repeated across different classes, this decision-making process took on distinctive dynamics: in some groups, more confident students naturally gravitated towards the role of “chef”, while in others, quieter learners unexpectedly emerged as strong candidates, surprising both their peers and the teacher. On one occasion, a usually reserved learner introduced the recipe with such flair and humour that the group unanimously selected her as the presenter, a choice that reshaped group dynamics for the remainder of the project.

From a task-design perspective, this activity integrated features of both information-gap and opinion-gap tasks. Learners transmitted procedural or descriptive information (for example, ingredient lists or step sequences) but also evaluated peers’ performances as they negotiated role allocation. Such exchanges promoted negotiation of meaning (Long 1996) when utterances proved unclear or ambiguous. For instance, during one audition, a learner announced: «First you cut the potatoes after boil», prompting peers to intervene: «So you cut before or after the water boils?». The clarification sequence illustrates how peer interaction triggered reformulation, a process shown to facilitate interlanguage development (Mackey 1999; Lyster 2004). In another class, a learner tried to say: «She is the chef, she tells the steps», but produced «She tell the steps». The error did not pass unnoticed: a classmate quickly echoed: «She tells», accompanied by a hand gesture stressing the -s ending. The correction provoked laughter but also reinforced awareness of the third-person singular agreement in a playful, memorable way.

Accuracy issues such as the omission of the third-person -s («she add salt») or misformed passives («are cutted the onions») surfaced regularly in this stage. These instances were addressed through reactive focus on form rather than planned intervention. The teacher responded with brief recasts and clarification requests (e.g., «she adds salt», «the onions are cut»), ensuring that learners could notice and

adjust their output without disrupting task flow. Peers, too, played a role in prompting corrections, often echoing or reformulating target-like versions collaboratively. Across different cohorts, the same pattern emerged: learners became increasingly comfortable correcting each other during auditions, sometimes even turning the correction into a humorous aside that strengthened group cohesion rather than undermining it.

The rehearsal format had the additional benefit of making learners more aware of their pragmatic choices. In one case, a student acting as “chef” gave instructions too abruptly: «Now cut potatoes, put oil, mix». Peers hesitated, and one suggested, «Maybe say ‘Now you cut the potatoes’ or ‘The onions are cut’». This exchange highlighted how appropriacy and clarity are as essential as grammatical accuracy, aligning with the project’s communicative orientation. By rehearsing in role, students experienced directly how linguistic form interacts with audience reception, thereby internalising lessons about clarity, politeness, and register that would later shape the final performance.

Overall, the audition task exemplified how implicit form-focused instruction can be embedded within a communicative rehearsal. The linguistic refinement was not taught in advance but emerged through the need to make oneself understood and to convince others during role allocation. The process, repeated in several classes, showed consistent pedagogical value: learners did not merely practise language in isolation, but used it strategically to negotiate meaning, allocate responsibility, and establish group identity. This step, therefore, bridged the planning phase and the public performance, while simultaneously reinforcing both procedural cohesion and linguistic development.

## 6.7 STEP 6: STORYBOARD PLANNING

The sixth stage marked a shift from individual rehearsal to collaborative problem-solving, as groups were asked to reconstruct a scrambled video of a recipe. Learners watched a cooking demonstration that had been deliberately edited out of order, and they had to reorganise the sequence of events so that it matched the logical steps of the recipe. The non-linguistic outcome was a completed storyboard template with the corrected order of frames, which then served as the basis for planning their own recipe videos.

To scaffold the activity, the teacher provided several sets of materials: laminated verb cards (*cut, stir, add, bake, put, mix, serve*), coloured cards with sequencing linkers (*first, then, next, afterwards, finally*), and a supplementary list of discourse markers that could be used to frame the narration (*so, well, in the end*). The video itself functioned as the authentic input, while the cards worked as tangible prompts that students could manipulate as they debated the correct order. This design created a multimodal workspace where visual, auditory and kinaesthetic elements were

integrated.

The activity operationalised key SLA mechanisms. First, it promoted noticing and noticing-the-gap (Schmidt 1990). For example, when one group proposed: «First he cut the garlic, then he put the sauce, then he stir it», another student immediately reacted: «No, stir is present, it's stirred!». This exchange generated a negotiation sequence in which peers corrected each other's forms and repeated the corrected version aloud. In another group, one learner said: «He putted the salt and mixed». Here, the invented form «putted» triggered laughter, followed by a quick reminder from a peer: «Not putted, just put!». Such moments show how learners actively tested hypotheses about verb morphology, with errors functioning as opportunities for peer-led feedback.

Second, the activity pushed phonological working memory and chunking processes (N. Ellis 1996). Learners rehearsed verbs and linkers aloud, stringing them into increasingly formulaic sequences. Typical productions included: «First he put the flour, then he mixed the eggs, after he put in the oven, and finally he made a cake». Although errors persisted («after he put in the oven» lacking “it” as object, or «he mix the eggs» without -ed), these did not hinder comprehension and were addressed in the subsequent feedback stage.

Students' discourse revealed how they were internalising both discourse and grammar simultaneously. One group initially relied on minimal cohesion, repeating: «And then... and then... and then...». After exposure to the linker cards and a brief consciousness-raising activity, the same group reformulated their narration more effectively: «First he chopped the onions, afterwards he added the tomatoes, meanwhile he boiled the water, and finally he served the soup». The shift shows how even basic visual scaffolds (cards pinned on the whiteboard and reordered collectively) supported the appropriation of a broader range of cohesive devices.

Another interlanguage pattern emerged in article usage. While describing the scrambled scenes, several learners produced utterances such as «The chef cut the bread and put the butter» or «He mixed the rice». When encouraged to think about uncountable nouns, one student reformulated: «He mixed the rice... no, not the rice, just rice». These micro-negotiations illustrated how article use could be addressed indirectly.

The learners' reactions also shed light on their affective engagement. At first, many appeared puzzled by the scrambled order, with comments like «No, this can't be first. He cannot bake before cutting!». This confusion, however, spurred animated discussions and laughter, creating a low-anxiety environment in which students were willing to experiment with language. Several explicitly connected the activity to real cooking logic: «He made a mistake. You never add sugar before eggs!».

From a pedagogical perspective, the use of multimodal materials proved crucial. The scrambled video acted as an authentic yet challenging input; the verb cards drew attention to regular/irregular morphology; and the linker cards prompted variety in

sequencing and discourse markers. Together, these artefacts allowed the teacher to embed explicit form-focused instruction within a communicative, problem-solving activity.

In theoretical terms, Step 6 illustrates how also structure-based instruction can maintain authenticity while creating space for explicit focus on grammar and discourse. Sequencing markers and past tense morphology were not introduced as isolated drills, but as indispensable tools for solving the challenge of reconstructing the recipe. The process thus reinforced the principle that form-focused instruction is most effective when learners perceive its communicative necessity (Long 1991; Ellis 2019, 2024).

## 6.8 STEP 7: FINAL VIDEO PRODUCTION AND MACRO-TASK PERFORMANCE

The culmination of the project was the production and presentation of the recipe video, conceived from the outset as the macro-task and serving as the capstone of the entire sequence. Each student was required to speak for a minimum of forty seconds, a threshold deliberately imposed to ensure that all group members would take an active part in the communicative performance, rather than relying on a few dominant voices. This final stage exhibited the defining characteristics of a task as outlined by Ellis (2003b): it was meaning-focused, gap-oriented, reliant on learners' existing resources, and resulted in a tangible, non-linguistic product. The outcome was a complete video artefact, which students showcased before the class, demonstrating their ability to convey procedural content in English while maintaining audience engagement.

The recording phase, although not directly monitored in school for safety reasons, offered an invaluable dimension to the project. Groups were required to meet at one member's home to shoot the recipe video, and this domestic setting introduced an authenticity that the classroom could not provide. Learners later reported that the informal atmosphere of kitchens and living rooms added both excitement and pressure: cameras rolling, utensils clattering, and peers watching triggered heightened attention to accuracy and delivery. This pressure often activated "noticing the gap" (Schmidt 1990). As students struggled to phrase instructions under real-time constraints, they spontaneously reformulated or self-corrected: «She add... she adds sugar now»; «Now the rice is... is boiled».

When the videos were presented back in class, a new communicative layer was added. Beyond the fixed script of the recording, groups were asked to answer questions from their classmates. These Q&A sessions produced some of the most spontaneous and animated exchanges of the entire project. A typical example occurred when a group presented a dish involving frying in oil. A student from another group asked, «Why do you fry two times?» The presenters hesitated, conferred briefly, and then one explained, «Because first is fried the onion, then is fried the meat... oh... the meat

is fried». The negotiation not only clarified the cooking process but also encouraged the learners to adjust their language towards more accurate passive constructions.

The atmosphere during presentations was both festive and academically rich. On several occasions, students brought the actual dishes into class, transforming the session into a multisensory event where taste and language intertwined. One group offered small portions of homemade tiramisù after their video, prompting laughter and spontaneous commentary: «It's very delicious, but too sweet!». Even these side remarks became opportunities for emergent language practice, showing how task outcomes can extend beyond the strict linguistic frame to foster authentic interaction.

From a pedagogical perspective, this macro-task delivered multiple benefits. Learners experienced genuine ownership over a tangible product, which fostered motivation and pride. The extended scope of the project promoted autonomy, as students assumed responsibility for planning, performing, recording, editing, and presenting. Because the task was embedded in an authentic communicative purpose, motivation rarely faltered: even in classes where initial engagement had been uneven, the prospect of producing a “real” video galvanised collective effort. Moreover, the interdisciplinary potential of the project surfaced naturally. During presentations, cultural reflections often emerged as students explained the origins of their chosen recipes. For example, one group contextualised their couscous recipe by linking it to migration stories in their own families, while another used their lasagne video to discuss Italian regional variations. Such digressions connected English learning to history, geography, and religious studies, embodying the cross-curricular affordances of task-based pedagogy.

Accuracy issues, inevitably, were still visible. Errors such as *the eggs is mixed*, *she put sugar*, or *the vegetables are cutted* recurred, but these were not treated as failures. In line with the principles of task-based learning, the teacher noted these instances during presentations and returned to them later, selecting representative errors for anonymous correction on the board. This practice balanced fluency and accuracy: learners were free to speak without interruption during the performance, but they also had subsequent opportunities to reflect on their language in a non-threatening, collective format.

Step 7, repeated across multiple cohorts, consistently confirmed its role as the project's capstone. It consolidated the incremental learning from earlier stages and channelled it into a final artefact that carried both communicative and symbolic weight. As such, it instantiated Ellis's (2019, 2024) vision of a modular curriculum: implicit knowledge nurtured through meaningful, authentic projects, supported by targeted explicit attention where necessary. For learners, the production of the video was not only a linguistic challenge but also a memorable social and cultural experience, one that combined performance, creativity, and collaboration in ways that a traditional lesson could never fully replicate

## 6.9 CONCLUDING REMARKS ON THE *WORLD RECIPES* PROJECT

The *World Recipes* project exemplified how task-based, project-oriented work can activate not only SLA processes but also broader educational values of inclusion, intercultural awareness, and personal growth through collaborative achievement. Beyond its linguistic objectives, it created opportunities for students to collaborate, to get to know one another, and to experiment with roles and identities in a supportive environment. This dimension was particularly significant in contexts where some learners were marginalised due to recent migration, linguistic insecurity, or learning difficulties. As Cummins (2000) notes, educational practices that validate learners' multiple identities and linguistic repertoires can enhance both academic engagement and self-esteem.

A particularly illustrative case was the group composed of three students: one recently arrived from England (L.), one Vietnamese (N.), and one Italian (E.), who had special learning needs and a marked sense of self-marginalisation. Each brought different challenges and strengths to the group. L. had excellent command of English but little knowledge of Italian, which made everyday communication difficult. N., by contrast, had been in Italy long enough to be quite fluent in Italian, but struggled with English. E., while reluctant to engage with English due to perceived difficulty, was technologically skilled and, as the strongest Italian speaker in the group, unexpectedly became the linguistic reference point for his peers. This shift in role conferred on him a new sense of competence and authority, which bolstered his self-confidence.

The group devised an innovative solution on its own. L. would learn Italian terms, while N. and E. would acquire the English equivalents. Each member, therefore, presented ingredients in both languages, alternating explanations of the preparation processes. The group selected Vietnamese salad rolls as their recipe and prefaced their cooking demonstration with a shared PowerPoint presentation in English on the Tet festival. N. also chose to wear traditional Vietnamese clothing, and introduced a video of a Tet dance, which culminated in the whole class, initially hesitant, joining in the dance and later sharing the rolls. One student recalled afterwards that at first they had been shy, but that when everyone started to dance, they simply enjoyed the moment.

From a linguistic perspective, this collaboration fostered reciprocal and collaborative language learning, allowing each student to assume both the roles of learner and expert. Task-based interaction created opportunities for negotiation of meaning (Long 1996) and noticing (Schmidt 1990), while the cross-linguistic exchange exemplified how tasks can activate both explicit and implicit learning processes (Ellis 2003b). A space for authentic intercultural exchange was created, where traditions were presented not through abstract study but embodied practice, aligning with Byram's (2020) model of intercultural communicative competence. Socially, it fostered peer solidarity and broke down barriers of marginalisation, as the

group became a locus of collective creativity. For E., the experience was especially empowering: moving from a self-perceived outsider in language learning to a central figure within the group dynamic. He commented informally that he had never thought he could help others with English, but that this time they had listened to him. Motivation, as Dörnyei (2001) highlights, often increases when learners perceive themselves as active contributors within a meaningful community of practice.

From a curriculum-design perspective, the project also exemplified the implementation of a modular curriculum (Ellis 2019, 2024) through a project-based pedagogical approach. The initial phases (Steps 1–3) provided mostly input-based, closed-outcome activities that scaffolded comprehension and familiarised learners with lexis, genre conventions, and procedural sequencing. These activities ensured engagement while maintaining interactional authenticity (Bachman/Palmer 1996). Steps 4–6 progressively expanded cognitive and linguistic demands through reasoning- and opinion-gap activities, encouraging learners to reorganise input and negotiate meaning collaboratively. Step 7 culminated in the video recording task, which required learners to draw extensively on their developing interlanguage resources.

While Ellis’s (2019) structural checklist includes persistent problem areas such as past tense, articles, third-person -s, and conditionals, in this project, the most salient issue to emerge spontaneously was learners’ recurrent reliance on bare imperatives and limited use of politeness markers. What initially appeared straightforward from an L1 contrastive perspective (given the morphological transparency of the imperative in Italian) revealed itself to be problematic in practice, with learners overusing direct forms in ways that sounded overly peremptory. Rather than being addressed through pre-planned instruction, these difficulties were taken up reactively during task interaction, through brief recasts, clarification requests, and modelling. Such episodic interventions preserved the primacy of task-based work while drawing attention to pragmatic alternatives, thereby mitigating the risk of fossilisation and supporting the development of greater sociopragmatic appropriateness.

By contrast, other issues were targeted through a more structural, pre-selected approach. A clear example was the work on discourse markers, where over-reliance on repetitive sequencing (*then... then... then*) was addressed through a CR activity designed to expand learners’ repertoire of cohesive devices (*first, afterwards, finally, meanwhile, etc.*). Here, explicit attention to forms was embedded in a communicative activity, allowing learners to notice stylistic alternatives and improve the overall cohesion of their storyboard. The macro-task performance consolidated these strands.

A related issue was the management of the structural checklist. Overall, the checklist changed very little across iterations of the project, since it was closely tied to the communicative functions required in the recipe domain: learners needed to master sequencing devices, cohesive markers, and basic morphosyntax in order

to produce intelligible and conventionalised instructional discourse. At the same time, the checklist proved highly flexible. Structure-based phases, in particular, lent themselves to selective adaptation, as different forms could be prioritised depending on what emerged in class. For example, during the storyboard stage the focus naturally fell on present-tense passives rather than on past forms, since the genre demanded instructional rather than narrative structures. Likewise, although sequencing markers were the primary target, the activity also opened space to highlight stance adverbials such as *stir quickly* or *pour slowly*. This adaptability underscored the diagnostic rather than prescriptive nature of the checklist: it functioned as a baseline for anticipated difficulties, but could be reshaped to accommodate emergent gaps and opportunities as they arose in task performance.

As for the sequencing of task-based and structure-based phases, initially, I struggled to reproduce in *World Recipes* the kind of structuring I had adopted in *The Ad Challenge*, where the first part of the project was designed as task-based and the second part as structure-based. At the time, this seemed more coherent, since it gave the impression of a clean division between meaning-oriented and form-oriented work. However, as the *World Recipes* project unfolded, I realised that alternating between the two strands within the same cycle was more responsive to emergent needs. The interleaving of activities with different orientations helped maintain attentional balance: when learners moved from an implicit, meaning-focused task into a more explicit, structure-oriented phase, they were more attuned and receptive. In this sense, the alternation avoided fatigue, sustained engagement, and allowed me to address form-related issues at the moment when they surfaced most clearly. What had first appeared less “tidy” than a block design turned out to be pedagogically advantageous, not only because it gave me more flexibility, but also because the class seemed more in tune with this rhythm of shifting attentional focus.

All in all, producing and presenting the videos required learners to integrate lexical, grammatical, and discourse knowledge in pursuit of a clear communicative goal. Learners’ monitoring and self-correction during filming also highlighted the role of explicit knowledge as a support mechanism for noticing and editing (Ellis 1994; Schmidt 1990). As one group commented after completing their video, «We corrected each other many times while recording. It was stressful, but in the end our English sounded better».

The educational impact extended beyond SLA outcomes. The project promoted learner autonomy, motivation, and interdisciplinarity, as learners took ownership of planning and performance. Connections to history, culture, and religion enriched the communicative context. The festive closing event, where videos were shared and dishes tasted, reinforced the social dimension of learning and embodied Brumfit’s (1984) call to balance accuracy with fluency in real communicative contexts. One student summed up the experience memorably: «This is the first time English made me feel part of a group, not just a class». Taken together, the *World Recipes* project

demonstrates how a modular curriculum can provide space for both linguistic development and broader educational goals: fostering intercultural awareness, validating learners' diverse identities, and building solidarity through collective creativity.

## 7. THE *SUPERQUARK* PROJECT

### 7.1 INTRODUCTION TO *SUPERQUARK*

This project was implemented during the third year of *Liceo delle Scienze Applicate* where the general proficiency level is slightly higher than that of the students from the first and second years who participated in the former projects (B1 → B2)

In Italy, the *Indicazioni nazionali per i licei* establish that the development of language competence involves not only receptive and productive abilities, but also the capacity to engage with the cultural realities of the communities where the language is spoken (Ministero dell'Istruzione 2010). In everyday teaching practice, this requirement has often led to a stronger emphasis on cultural topics, particularly those connected with the history and literature of the United Kingdom, compared with other English-speaking contexts.

The expected exit level at the end of secondary school is set at a minimum of B2. According to the Common European Framework (Council of Europe 2020), this level is characterised by the ability to interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that allows regular communication with native speakers without effort, and by the ability to produce clear, detailed texts on a wide range of subjects, including the capacity to explain a viewpoint on topical issues while weighing up different options. These descriptors imply that, beyond acquiring the literary or historical knowledge specified in the *Indicazioni*, learners are also expected to use English flexibly across registers and genres, to sustain interaction, to manage both narrative and expository discourse, and to negotiate meaning in authentic communicative contexts.

Taken together, the normative and descriptive frameworks suggest that the objectives of English teaching should be conceived along two interrelated axes: the development of linguistic and communicative competence, and the acquisition of knowledge of foreign cultures.

In many Italian *liceo* classrooms, oral assessment practices continue to privilege the question-and-answer teacher-led sessions on literature and culture. The learning activities facilitating the study of literature and history tend to leave little space for multi-modal teaching designs, especially given the heavy reliance on the use of

textbooks by some more traditional teachers (see Petrocelli 2020, 2021). Such practices risk producing predominantly monologic, expository language use, which often lacks spontaneity, audience interaction, and the variety of communicative functions that characterise everyday language use. This discrepancy between what is assessed and CEFR demands can generate emotional and motivational blocks in learners, especially when they perceive that their communicative potential is undervalued, and their ability to express themselves through varied modes of English is neither encouraged nor recognised.

The *Superquark* project aims to reconcile these issues by fulfilling national guidelines for culture/literature and working towards the CEFR profile for B2, while shifting away from monologic oral tests toward multimodal, interactive, and creative tasks that reflect real-world language use. By embedding culture and literature of the Anglophone world into tasks that require not just exposition but dramatization, interaction, role-play, narration, interviews and multimodal production, the approach enables learners to use their English more dynamically. At the same time, explicit FFI ensures that persistent linguistic difficulties are addressed, not as ends but as support for improved communicative efficacy. The deliberately varied activities culminate in a macro-task that respects both national guidelines and the communicative demands of real language use.

The project drew directly on the content syllabus, which covered key topics of early English history, such as the Celts, the Anglo-Saxons, King Alfred the Great, King Harold II, William the Conqueror and the Battle of Hastings, the Magna Carta, and the Black Death. Moreover, the syllabus tackled a literary milestone like Beowulf. The synopsis below traces the step-by-step development of the *Superquark* project, from topic negotiation and historical research to the final documentary production. It is not intended as a prescriptive template but as an adaptable framework that can be recalibrated according to class responsiveness, contextual constraints, and the evolving demands of learner interlanguage. What follows is the synopsis of the project design.

### 7.1.1 Synopsis of the modular design for Superquark project

#### Step 1: Research and information gap

Task-based phase (implicit knowledge-oriented)

- Task-based activity: Students worked in pairs (A and B), each receiving a simplified fact sheet about medieval history and literature with different gaps. Pair A might know when the Battle of Hastings took place but not who fought in it, while Pair B had only the latter information. By asking and answering questions in English, they completed their fact sheets.
- Implicit Form-Focused Instruction: The teacher scaffolded exchanges, encouraging reporting verbs and passives (*It is said that...*, *It was signed in...*), while

reformulating literal translations (*He make the law* → *He made the law*).

- Non-linguistic outcome: Completed fact sheets for each pair, later combined into a class-wide reference set.

### Step 2: Cloze texts and timeline construction

Structure-based phase (explicit knowledge-oriented)

- Supporting activity: Groups worked on cloze texts summarising the main events and works (Celts, Anglo-Saxons, Alfred, William, Magna Carta, Black Death, Beowulf). Filling in missing verbs in the past simple in active and passive form. Afterwards, groups placed all events and figures on a collective timeline.
- Explicit Form-Focused Instruction: Focus on past simple verb forms, contrasting active/passive and regular/irregular patterns. The teacher used board correction and peer checking to highlight accuracy. Depending on class response, explicit focus on sequential markers.
- Non-linguistic outcome: A collaboratively built timeline of medieval history and literature, serving as a shared knowledge base.

### Step 3: Initial diagnostic task (topic allocation)

Task-based Phase (implicit knowledge-oriented)

- Task-based activity: Opinion-gap task. Learners were introduced to the overall project of creating a documentary and asked to brainstorm in English which historical and literary topics they found most interesting. Groups then negotiated the allocation of subjects (Celts, Anglo-Saxons, ...).
- Implicit Form-Focused Instruction: Literal translations and formulaic requests (*I want this, We take that*). Reactive feedback and reformulations with modal verbs (*We could / We might*), hedges (*Maybe, perhaps, I think*), and comparative forms (*This topic is easier / more interesting*).
- Non-linguistic outcome: A class-wide distribution of topics, with each group responsible for one.

### Step 4: Research and content deepening

Task-based phase (implicit knowledge-oriented)

- Task-based activity: Across two to three lessons, learners conducted in-class research on their assigned topic. Working in groups, they consulted simplified resources (short texts, timelines, visual materials) and collaboratively selected, summarised, and discussed key facts.
- Implicit Form-Focused Instruction: irregular past tense (*he fight* → *he fought*), passive voice (*it sign* → *it was signed*), and lexis (*charter, plague, epic poem*). Peer scaffolding and negotiation of meaning frequently generated opportunities for noticing.
- Non-linguistic outcome: Expanded group fact sheets and annotated notes on each topic, collaboratively produced, serving as the knowledge base for later script-

writing phases.

### Step 5: Script feasibility and genre constraints

Structure-based phase – explicit knowledge-oriented

- Supporting activity: Groups evaluated possible documentary formats (interview, sketch, role-play, oral exam). They categorised what they could do, what might be difficult, what was not possible, and what was required.
- Explicit Form-Focused Instruction: epistemic (may, might) and dynamic modality (can, cannot, must, should). The teacher provided scaffolding with sentence starters (*We can...* / *We cannot...* / *We may...* / *We must...*).
- Non-linguistic outcome: A written feasibility plan organised into categories, which guided the practical choices for later script development.

### Step 6: Audition and role allocation

Task-based phase (implicit knowledge-oriented)

- Task-based activity: Groups staged auditions and rehearsed roles (narrator, character, interviewer). Peers gave feedback on clarity/expressivity.
- Implicit Form-Focused Instruction: Teacher noted mispronunciations (*Magna Carta*), missing auxiliaries (*He born in 849*) and gave recasts.
- Non-linguistic outcome: Clear role allocation and improved delivery.

### Step 7: Preparatory actions checklist

Structure-based phase (explicit knowledge-oriented)

- Supporting activity: Groups sequenced and categorised a teacher-provided checklist of preparatory actions for the documentary (e.g., *prepare the costumes, set up the room, find the camera, write the script, decide turns of speaking*). Each action was marked as *done* or *still to do*, and then reported orally to the teacher.
- Explicit Form-Focused Instruction: Contrast between active (*We prepared the costumes*) and passive (*The costumes were prepared*) forms, with focus on the simple present and past.
- Non-linguistic outcome: A completed checklist of preparatory actions sequenced as *done/still to do*, linked to the filming plan.

### Step 8: Quote relay. Powerful words in circulation

Task-based phase (implicit knowledge-oriented)

- Task-based activity: Groups relayed short impactful quotes from Sir David Attenborough, Jane Goodall, and Piero Angela, paraphrasing them for peers and then voting on which sounded most powerful.
- Implicit Form-Focused Instruction: In retelling, interlanguage features emerged (e.g., «Important to act now»). Teacher intervened only through recasts and prompts.

- Non-linguistic outcome: A class-wide list of “most powerful quotes” collaboratively selected and displayed.

### Step 9: Inspirational documentarists and rhetorical language

Structure-based phase (explicit knowledge-oriented)

- Supporting activity: Groups watched excerpts of speeches by inspirational documentarists (e.g., Sir David Attenborough, Jane Goodall, Piero Angela). They discussed which speaker they found most convincing and why, before voting for their “inspirational documentarist.”
- Explicit Form-Focused Instruction: Teacher-led CR activities highlighted rhetorical devices frequently used in the speeches, such as dummy *it* (*It is important that...*), cleft sentences (*What we must do is...*), extraposition (*It is essential to act now*), dislocation, and parallelism (*We must halt... We must recapture... We must fix...*). Learners compared authentic extracts with simplified alternatives, discussed their effect, and experimented with the forms in their own speech.
- Non-linguistic outcome: A class-wide election of the “inspirational documentarist” and collaboratively produced notes on rhetorical strategies observed, forming a resource for later script-writing.

### Step 10: Final macro-task (*Superquark* documentary)

Task-based phase (implicit knowledge-oriented)

- Task-based activity: Groups produced and presented video segments, later edited into one class documentary, modelled on *Superquark*.
- Implicit Form-Focused Instruction: Teacher monitored but deferred correction, prioritising fluency and authenticity.
- Non-linguistic outcome: Whole-class documentary screened at an event with peers, parents, and teachers.

## 7.2 STEP 1: RESEARCH AND INFORMATION GAP

This step represented the class’s first real engagement with the content dimension of the project and was deliberately designed as a task-based phase with implicit attention to form. The students were not yet responsible for a specific topic. Instead, the aim was to construct a shared foundation of historical and literary knowledge that could support subsequent stages. For this reason, the activity was framed as a simple but structured information gap. Learners worked in pairs, each provided with an incomplete fact sheet on key medieval topics such as The Anglo-Saxons, King Alfred the Great, the Battle of Hastings, the Black Death, and Beowulf. Pair A might know that *the Magna Carta* was signed in 1215, but not by whom, while Pair B knew the king’s name but not the year. Similarly, one pair had partial information on Beowulf, including the name of the hero but not the monster he fought, while another had the opposite.

The asymmetrical design of the material created a genuine need for interaction: learners had to ask and answer questions to complete their sheets. Importantly, these exchanges unfolded entirely in English, with the teacher monitoring but intervening only to provide recasts, prompts, or occasional clarification requests. For instance, when a student asked, «Who signed Magna Carta?», the teacher reformulated softly: «Who signed the Magna Carta?». The learner repeated the corrected version and wrote it down, illustrating a moment of noticing triggered not by explicit explanation but by the communicative necessity of obtaining information.

The simplicity of the information gap was crucial at this stage. Unlike more complex simulations, learners needed only to manage basic question–answer structures: *When did it happen?*, *Who was the king?*, *Where was the battle?*. Yet within these apparently elementary exchanges, many characteristic features of interlanguage emerged. Students frequently dropped auxiliaries («Where they fight in 1066?»), struggled with irregular past forms («Harold lose the battle»), or overgeneralised rules («William become king»). Each of these provided an occasion for teacher reformulations or peer corrections. For example, after hearing «William become king», a peer interjected: «No become. Became». This type of peer feedback illustrates how attentional focus can be distributed across participants, rather than being the exclusive responsibility of the teacher, and how noticing can be socially mediated.

Two lessons were generally devoted to this exploration phase, during which the class gradually pieced together a collective picture of the medieval period. The materials supplied by the teacher were deliberately concise, made of short paragraphs in simplified English, accompanied by dates, names, and key terms. They were left incomplete so that no individual learner could construct the full narrative alone. The missing pieces could only be obtained through interaction, so that everyone found themselves compelled to speak, because their partner's sheet contained the information they lacked. The negotiation of meaning was therefore both authentic and necessary.

The classroom dynamics bore witness to the typical processes identified in SLA research. Learners engaged in confirmation checks («The Black Death... it was in London?» → «Yes, it was in London in 1348»), clarification requests («What is plague?» → «It means big illness, many people die»), and self-repair («He born... he was born in 849»). These episodes provided evidence of selective attention at work: while the lexical novelty of content words such as *charter* or *plague* was initially most salient, the teacher's recasts gently redirected attention to morphosyntactic features. In SLA terms, one could argue that without such nudging, learners' attention might have been “blocked” by the more salient lexical cues, overshadowing the grammatical forms (Ellis 2006).

Perhaps the most revealing moments were those in which learners appropriated teacher prompts for their own purposes. After several reformulations, one group began spontaneously using the passive construction to report historical facts: «It

was signed in 1215», «It was fought by William». Though not yet consolidated (e.g., «The battle fight in 1066»), these attempts indicated that the passive voice had been noticed and was beginning to enter learners' developing system, at least as a tentative hypothesis. According to Schmidt's noticing hypothesis (1990), such moments of awareness are precisely what enable interlanguage restructuring over time.

The collective outcome of this phase was a set of completed fact sheets, which were then collated into a class-wide reference. Yet the linguistic value went well beyond the documents themselves. The design of the task ensured that grammatical accuracy was not imposed externally but emerged as functionally relevant. In order to communicate historical facts, learners had to manipulate the past tense, experiment with the passive, and attempt more precise formulations. The non-linguistic product, the filled-in sheets, was therefore inseparably tied to the linguistic process.

In summary, this first step illustrates the pedagogical potential of an information gap when embedded in a larger project. By withholding complete information from each learner, the task created genuine communicative pressure, leading to spontaneous use of target-like forms and opportunities for reactive focus on form. The teacher's role was not to deliver a grammar lesson but to scaffold interaction through recasts and gentle prompts, thereby transforming errors into noticing opportunities. All in all, Step 1 embodied the rationale of TBLT: forms became salient because they were needed, not because they were imposed.

### 7.3 STEP 2: CLOZE TEXTS AND TIMELINE CONSTRUCTION

This step represented the first explicit orientation towards form within the project. Having previously engaged in information-gap exchanges that foregrounded fluency, learners were now asked to focus directly on the past tense system, both in active and passive voice. The non-linguistic outcome was a collaboratively built timeline of medieval history and literature, which consolidated content knowledge while making the grammatical dimension unavoidable.

The materials were specifically designed for feasibility. Each group received a cloze text of around 120 words, summarising one of the proposed topics. The texts were short, accessible in vocabulary, and highly contextualised, but they had systematic gaps where verbs had been removed. These gaps required learners to supply the correct past simple form, sometimes regular (*ruled, signed*), sometimes irregular (*took, became*), and occasionally in the passive voice (*was signed, were sent*).

One example was the text on the Magna Carta:

The Magna Carta (Cloze extract)

In the year 1215, King John of England \_\_\_ (rule) the country. Many barons \_\_\_ (decide) to fight because the king often \_\_\_ (take) their money. Finally, they met the king at Runnymede, near London. There, the Magna Carta \_\_\_ (sign) by King John. The document \_\_\_ (say) that the king must follow the law and that the barons \_\_\_ (have) some rights. Copies of the Magna Carta \_\_\_ (send) across the

kingdom. The Magna Carta \_\_\_\_ (become) an important symbol of liberty.

The feasibility of this design lay in the balance between support and challenge. On the one hand, the texts gave a clear historical context, so learners could infer the correct form without being overwhelmed. On the other hand, the alternation of active and passive verbs forced them to test hypotheses about English morphology. Predictably, learners overgeneralised rules, omitted auxiliaries («Magna Carta signed in 1215»), or confused forms («The battle was fight in 1066»). These errors created precisely the noticing opportunities that task-supported work is intended to generate.

Teacher intervention was minimal but timely. When one group wrote «William win the battle», the teacher underlined the error on the board and asked: «Does this look right?» Peers quickly corrected: «No, won, not win». In this way, feedback was both explicit and collaborative, allowing students to appropriate the correct form. Similarly, when another group produced «The Magna Carta signed in 1215», the teacher reformulated: «The Magna Carta was signed in 1215», highlighting the auxiliary and word order without turning the moment into a detached grammar drill.

Once the cloze exercises had been completed, groups moved to the second phase: placing the events on a collective timeline displayed on the classroom wall. Each group contributed the dates and facts from its text, explaining aloud as they pinned them: «First the Celts lived in Britain. Then the Anglo-Saxons came. Alfred fought the Vikings. Later, the Magna Carta was signed in 1215». This rehearsal of forms in context embedded grammatical practice in meaningful discourse. At times, this opened up opportunities for reflection and, when necessary, explicit focus on sequential discourse markers.

The timeline became a material artefact around which further noticing could take place. As learners compared entries, contrasts emerged: one group had written «The plague killed many people», another «Many people were killed by the plague». At times, this led to reflection on voice and perspective.

The cloze ensured that learners' attention was not monopolised by lexical items (names, dates, places) but distributed towards less salient grammatical features. By embedding accuracy requirements within a meaningful outcome (a complete text and a timeline), the activity avoided the pitfall of isolated drills. The non-linguistic product was a visual chronology of medieval England, but the real achievement was the way grammatical forms became indispensable tools for historical narration.

#### 7.4 Step 3: Initial diagnostic task (topic allocation)

This step marked the point at which learners moved from shared exploration to individual responsibility. The class had already gained some general familiarity with medieval English history and literature in the previous phases. Now, the task was to decide who would specialise in which topic and eventually develop it into a

documentary segment. The design was explicitly task-based: learners had to negotiate, justify choices, and reach an agreement, using English as the medium of interaction.

The materials for this activity were deliberately simple but straightforward. The teacher provided topic cards with short, accessible descriptions of each option (5-6 lines of simplified English plus one key date and a memorable fact). For example:

- The Black Death card: In 1348, a terrible disease spread across England. It killed about one-third of the population.
- The Magna Carta card: In 1215, King John signed an important document. It said that even the king must follow the law.
- Beowulf card: This is the oldest poem in English. Beowulf fights monsters and a dragon.

These cards were not exhaustive resources but prompts designed to spark curiosity and make the discussion feasible. Even weaker learners could access the gist and use the key facts to argue: «It is interesting, we can choose this». More advanced learners, instead, could expand beyond the cards with personal knowledge.

The classroom dynamic was lively. Learners quickly expressed preferences, often falling back on direct, formulaic statements such as «I want this topic» or «We take Beowulf». Teacher intervention came in the form of subtle recasts and prompts. When a student said «I want Alfred», the teacher reformulated: «So, you might prefer Alfred?» and the learner repeated. Similarly, «We take Black Death because it's interesting» was expanded by the teacher: «Perhaps you could say, 'We could choose the Black Death because it's interesting'». These interventions embedded modal verbs and hedges into the negotiation, making them noticeable without interrupting the communicative flow.

Moments of interlanguage were pedagogically revealing. At one table, the dialogue unfolded as follows. Learners began to mobilise comparatives («better», «easier»), even if with omissions («important king», «Alfred easier»). The functional deployment of hedges («maybe», «perhaps») showed an expanding repertoire, stimulated by the need to persuade peers. This interaction reflects what Swain (2005) terms “pushed output”: learners stretched their interlanguage beyond habitual formulas to achieve a communicative goal.

Negotiation of topics also raised questions of feasibility. Some groups argued for Beowulf because they liked the “storytelling” aspect, while others preferred the Magna Carta because it seemed easier to research. This practical dimension made the communicative situation authentic: students were not only expressing likes and dislikes but weighing effort, clarity, and accessibility. By the end of the step, the class had achieved a clear outcome: each group was officially assigned a topic, recorded on the board as a class agreement. Though simple in appearance, this outcome was fundamental: it anchored responsibility, created group identities, and ensured that each learner had a thematic focus to develop further.

From a theoretical point of view, this step highlights how implicit form-focused instruction can be embedded in negotiation tasks. Learners' initial reliance on direct translations and formulaic patterns was gradually diversified through recasts, modelling, and peer uptake. Attention was not diverted to isolated grammar exercises. It was instead channelled into moments of communicative need. The salience of modal verbs, hedges, and comparatives arose not because they were explicitly taught, but because they became functionally indispensable to the act of negotiation. In this sense, Step 3 exemplifies the rationale of task-based pedagogy: language forms are noticed, tested, and consolidated when they are needed to achieve a concrete, non-linguistic goal.

### 7.5 STEP 4: RESEARCH AND CONTENT DEEPENING

This step provided learners with the time and space to deepen their knowledge of the medieval topics allocated in the previous phase. Over the course of two to three lessons, the classroom became a small-scale research environment, where groups were asked to work with simplified resources to consolidate and expand their understanding of English history and literature. The rationale for dedicating several lessons to this activity was twofold. Firstly, to allow sufficient exposure to content so that later script-writing would be informed and coherent. Secondly, to create a context in which language forms could become salient through the negotiation of meaning.

The resources were deliberately crafted to be both accessible and stimulating. Each group received a short text of approximately 200–250 words, accompanied by visuals and timelines. For example, the sheet on Alfred the Great included a simplified narrative of his struggle against the Vikings, a portrait of the king, and a short timeline situating his reign between the Anglo-Saxons and the Norman Conquest. The *Beowulf* sheet summarised the epic in three parts (Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon) while embedding key lexical items such as *hero*, *monster*, *fight*, *victory*. The Magna Carta sheet provided both a short historical paragraph and a reproduction of the document's seal, accompanied by key terms such as *law*, *rights*, *king*, *charter*. These multimodal inputs were designed to trigger curiosity and interest.

The group was asked to complete the entire task, speaking in English. Learners read sections aloud, underlined dates or names, and then tried to rephrase them for their peers. The teacher's role was primarily to circulate, listening carefully and intervening only when necessary. When one group wrote things like «The Magna Carta signed in 1215» on their sheet, for example, the teacher recast it orally: «Yes, the Magna Carta was signed in 1215». Similarly, when discussing the Black Death, a learner said «The plague kill many people», which the teacher gently reformulated as «The plague killed many people, or we can also say many people were killed by the plague».

Other language issues emerged from the lexical demands of the texts. When a student encountered the word *charter* and asked, «What is charter?», a peer responded well enough to say «It is like the paper of the law». The teacher built on this: «Exactly, a charter is a legal document. The Magna Carta was a charter that limited the king's power». In this way, vocabulary learning was anchored to the historical context, reinforcing the connection between language and content.

The atmosphere of discovery was tangible. Groups frequently negotiated what to include in their notes. By the end of the phase, each group had produced an expanded and annotated fact sheet, enriched with paraphrased summaries, translations of key terms into English, and short notes for later use. Beyond the tangible artefact, the deeper pedagogical value lay in the interconnection of content and form. Learners were not memorising disconnected facts but constructing knowledge collaboratively in English, while simultaneously rehearsing the linguistic means to narrate, describe, and evaluate historical and literary phenomena.

From a theoretical perspective, this step illustrates how task-based content exploration can foster implicit attention to form. Learners' focus was primarily on content, but interlanguage features such as irregular verbs, passive constructions, and articles became salient whenever meaning broke down. Such moments exemplify Schmidt's (1990) noticing hypothesis and Long's (1996) interaction hypothesis: it was through negotiation, peer repair, and reactive recasts that learners' attentional focus shifted towards grammar. The cumulative effect was a gradual consolidation of linguistic accuracy embedded in authentic content learning.

In short, Step 4 functioned as a bridge between exploratory research and script-writing preparation. It ensured that learners were equipped with a shared repertoire of knowledge while providing repeated opportunities for noticing and interlanguage development. Its non-linguistic outcome (the expanded fact sheets) was inseparable from the linguistic processes that generated them, reinforcing the idea that language development is most effective when it is inseparably tied to meaningful and motivating tasks.

## 7.6 STEP 5: SCRIPT FEASIBILITY AND GENRE CONSTRAINTS

The fifth stage of the *Superquark* project required learners to shift from gathering historical content to deciding how this material could be transformed into a feasible documentary performance. At this point, the challenge was not only creative but also organisational: groups had to evaluate different possible formats, such as interviews, oral examinations, sketches, or re-enactments, against the concrete realities of time, resources, and group composition. This meant weighing their collective strengths against the task's constraints, a reasoning process that naturally demanded the use of modal verbs to express possibility, necessity, and factual or perceived limitations.

The non-linguistic outcome of this stage was a written feasibility plan, produced

collaboratively by each group. Unlike a script draft or a simple list of preferences, this plan was conceived as a project document that recorded the rationale behind their decision. It was structured around guiding categories provided by the teacher, such as *Things the group can do well*, *Challenges you may have*, *Things you cannot do*, and *Things you have to have for the shooting*. For example, one group wrote: «M. can act well, so he will play Alfred»; «We may not find a good space for filming»; «She can parody our language teacher»; and «We must have two microphones and a crown». Such formulations made the feasibility plan an authentic artefact, in which the language was instrumental to producing a tangible, decision-oriented product.

From an SLA perspective, the task exemplified a reasoning-gap activity (Prabhu 1987), since learners had to integrate factual knowledge, contextual constraints, and peer perspectives to arrive at a solution. Crucially, the communicative purpose could not be fulfilled without the deployment of modal verbs. Italian learners, however, tended to overgeneralise *must* as an all-purpose marker of necessity, producing sentences such as «We must not choose interview because it is difficult». This conveyed obligation rather than impossibility, and was reformulated through interaction into more accurate alternatives like «We cannot choose interview because we do not have time» or «We should avoid interview, because it requires more preparation». Similarly, the epistemic dimension of modality (*may*, *might*) was initially absent but began to surface when learners were explicitly prompted to consider probabilities and uncertainties. Expressions such as «We may not find a good space for filming» emerged as learners reflected on what was possible but not guaranteed, signalling progress in their repertoire of modal meanings.

To make these distinctions clear, the teacher embedded short CR activities within the activity. Rather than presenting complete model sentences, students were given sentence starters (*We can...* / *We cannot...* / *We may...* / *We must...*), each preceded by illustrative examples that clarified the nuances of meaning associated with the different modals. In this way, learners were guided to recognise, for instance, that *we cannot* might signal either a deontic restriction (*we cannot speak Italian during the recording*) or a dynamic limitation (*we cannot record in the gym because it is occupied*). These examples provided an orientation, enabling students to complete the prompts with greater semantic awareness in relation to their group's project. This guided practice created a direct link between linguistic form and activity content: articulating what they could do, what might prove difficult, what was impossible, and what was strictly necessary for success. The prompts ensured that learners noticed the difference between dynamic modality (what they were able to do in practice, e.g., «We can record at school because we have the equipment») and epistemic modality (what they judged probable or improbable, e.g., «We may not have time to edit»). In this way, form-focused work was not an abstract grammar exercise but a functional resource that enabled groups to complete the feasibility evaluation meaningfully.

The activity also revealed familiar interlanguage tendencies. Italian learners frequently avoided subject–auxiliary inversion in interrogatives, asking «We use role-play?» rather than «Can we use role-play?». These omissions were addressed through brief recasts and clarification requests, which helped learners to notice gaps without disrupting the flow of the activity. In several cases, peers themselves initiated repair, echoing corrected forms to maintain clarity in the negotiation. Such episodes underline the value of reactive focus on form: learners’ attention was drawn to problematic structures precisely at the moment of need, in line with the principle that noticing is most effective when linked to communicative breakdowns.

All in all, the activity was designed so that its successful completion depended on the use of targeted linguistic forms. The feasibility plan was the central non-linguistic outcome, and the accuracy of its reasoning relied on the precise use of modality. By embedding explicit attention to form through guided prompts and collaborative discussion, the activity preserved the primacy of meaning while simultaneously creating rich opportunities for interlanguage development. In this sense, Step 3 showed how creativity and accuracy need not be treated as competing goals: the communicative drive to make feasible choices compelled learners to refine their modal usage, making explicit instruction a natural extension of the task itself.

## 7.7 STEP 6: AUDITION AND ROLE ALLOCATION

This step introduced a performative dimension to the project, as groups staged auditions in order to assign roles such as narrator, character, or interviewer. The activity required learners to rehearse their parts in front of peers, who were then invited to provide feedback on clarity, expressivity, and overall effectiveness. The non-linguistic outcome was the concrete allocation of roles within each group, ensuring that responsibilities for the documentary were clearly distributed.

The linguistic dimension, however, was equally important. Unlike the feasibility activity, where explicit form-focused instruction on modal verbs had been central, this stage operated within a task-based frame, with attention to form emerging implicitly from communicative need. As learners rehearsed, they encountered difficulties with pronunciation, morphology, and syntax. The teacher’s interventions were limited to recasts, prompts, or gentle reformulations, offered at the point of need and immediately integrated into the rehearsal.

A typical example emerged during the auditions for narrators. One learner read aloud: «King Alfred born in 849». The teacher, without interrupting the flow, reformulated: «King Alfred was born in 849». Another group rehearsing an interview sequence introduced William the Conqueror with the phrase «He win the battle of Hastings». Peers immediately intervened: «No, he won the battle». The correction was accepted and rehearsed again, showing how peer repair can be both salient and motivating.

Pronunciation also surfaced as a frequent area of attention. Names such as Magna Carta or Beowulf were often produced with strong L1 transfer, eliciting giggles from peers but also serving as natural triggers for noticing. When one student pronounced Magna Carta as [ 'magna 'karta], the teacher intervened with a model and encouraged repetition, transforming what could have been a source of embarrassment into a moment of collective practice. Such incidents demonstrate how pronunciation, often marginalised in language classrooms, became salient because the performative task made clarity indispensable.

The feedback component was equally significant. Peers were encouraged to comment not only on factual accuracy but also on delivery. Comments such as «You must speak louder» or «Say it slowly, I cannot understand» created conditions for authentic negotiation of comprehensibility. While these remarks sometimes appeared in hybrid interlanguage forms («More slow, please»), they nonetheless represented meaningful communicative acts. Moreover, they reinforced the idea that clarity is not merely a linguistic achievement but also a social responsibility within collaborative projects.

The auditions thus served multiple pedagogical functions. They distributed roles fairly, provided learners with a rehearsal space where errors could surface, and created authentic opportunities for reactive focus on form. From a theoretical perspective, the step aligns with Long's (1996) interaction hypothesis: the need to be understood in a performance context generated clarification requests, recasts, and peer repair, all of which promoted interlanguage development. At the same time, it illustrated Schmidt's (1990) noticing hypothesis, as learners became aware of forms precisely at the moment when miscommunication or mispronunciation occurred.

In conclusion, Step 6 was not simply a logistical exercise in role assignment. It embodied the project's rationale by intertwining content, performance, and language development. The non-linguistic outcome of the allocation of roles was inseparable from the linguistic processes that enabled it. Learners rehearsed, noticed gaps, adjusted their production, and internalised corrections.

## 7.8 STEP 7: PREPARATORY ACTIONS AND CHECKLIST SEQUENCING

This step combined practical organisation with explicit attention to linguistic form. Learners were given a teacher-prepared checklist of preparatory actions for the documentary, ranging from logistical items (*prepare the costumes, set up the room, find the camera*) to linguistic and creative ones (*write the script, decide turns of speaking*). They had to sequence these actions, categorise them as *done* or *still to do*, and then report orally to the teacher. The non-linguistic outcome was a completed and ordered checklist that directly supported the forthcoming filming phase.

The design of the activity made grammatical choices unavoidable. In order to report accurately, learners had to manipulate both the active and passive voice in the

simple present and past. The contrast was made explicit by the teacher at the outset: *We prepared the costumes* versus *The costumes were prepared*. These models were not abstract grammar exercises but frames directly tied to the communicative purpose of reporting group progress.

The classroom dynamics reflected this dual orientation. Groups began by reviewing the checklist collaboratively, debating the status of each action. One group argued whether *setting up the room* should be marked as completed or not. A group, discussing costumes, produced «Costumes are prepared yesterday», prompting the teacher to recast: «Yes, the costumes were prepared yesterday». In this way, the passive voice became salient not as an isolated grammatical form but as a stylistic choice appropriate to formal reporting.

Learners also began to use the forms spontaneously in their oral reports. A typical exchange would be: A: «We wrote the script», B: «Yes, and the room is prepared», A: «But the camera is lost».

Here, the oscillation between active and passive illustrates the interlanguage trajectory: learners were experimenting, sometimes successfully («the room was prepared»), sometimes less so («the camera is not found instead of has not been found»). Each attempt, however, represented an engagement with form prompted by the communicative need to categorise and report.

The activity also led to the discussion of the pragmatic value of perspective. When one group insisted on using only the active voice, the teacher prompted reflection: «Sometimes it is better to focus on the action, not the people. In a report, we often say ‘The costumes were prepared’ rather than ‘We prepared the costumes’» This short intervention illustrated not only the morphosyntactic pattern of the passive but also its discourse function, linking form to genre expectations.

The feasibility of the materials contributed to the success of the activity. The checklist was concrete, short, and directly related to the upcoming production phase. Every learner could understand the actions and contribute to the discussion, while the linguistic effort lay in reformulating those actions into accurate and stylistically appropriate sentences. The non-linguistic outcome (the completed checklist) was therefore inseparable from the linguistic processes that produced it.

From a theoretical perspective, Step 7 exemplifies how explicit form-focused instruction can be integrated into an explicit FFI activity without losing authenticity. According to Ellis (2019, 2024), explicit grammar work is most effective when learners perceive the targeted forms as essential for task completion. In this case, the grammatical contrast between active and passive voice was not imposed externally but became necessary for the accurate reporting of progress. The design of the activity also counteracted the risk of overshadowing, where attention might otherwise have been monopolised by lexical items (costumes, camera, room). By embedding voice distinctions within the reporting function, the activity broadened learners’ attentional focus and promoted morphosyntactic accuracy.

In conclusion, Step 7 served both organisational and pedagogical purposes. The practical sequencing of preparatory actions brought the project closer to realisation, while the explicit focus on active and passive forms reinforced learners' grammatical repertoire. The resulting checklists, modest in form, embodied the intersection of content, organisation, and language learning: they showed that even administrative preparation can become a site of meaningful linguistic development when framed for a communicative goal.

### 7.9 STEP 8: QUOTE RELAY- POWERFUL WORDS IN CIRCULATION

This step served as a playful yet meaningful bridge between the logistical organisation of Step 7 and the explicit rhetorical focus of Step 9. The activity, a “quote relay”, exposed learners to the persuasive power of authentic language without reducing it to explicit grammar analysis.

Learners received short impactful sentences from the speeches of three well-known documentarists: Sir David Attenborough, Jane Goodall, and Piero Angela. Each quote was chosen for its accessibility and rhetorical weight. Examples included:

- «We must halt carbon emissions this decade». (Attenborough)
- «Surely working together, we are powerful enough to save the planet». (Attenborough)
- «Every individual makes a difference every day. What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make». (Goodall)
- «It is not too late. Nature is amazingly resilient, and we can restore it if we work together». (Goodall)
- «Science is not only knowledge: it is also culture. What we must do is bring science closer to everyone». (Angela)
- «It is essential that young people keep their curiosity alive, because curiosity is the engine of progress». (Angela)

Each group read their assigned quotes, discussed them briefly, and then passed them on orally, without showing the card to another group. The receiving group paraphrased what they heard, wrote it down, and transmitted it again. By the time the relay had circulated around the classroom, the original quotes had been reshaped multiple times.

As expected, interlanguage features surfaced in the process. Attenborough's cleft «What we must do is bring science closer to everyone» became «What important is bring science close» while Goodall's «It is not too late» was often reduced to «Not too late to save nature». Such approximations revealed how learners were grappling with rhetorical form while trying to preserve meaning. Teacher intervention remained minimal, relying on brief recasts: when one group produced «Important to protect the future», the teacher reformulated: «Yes, it is important to protect the future». The

uptake was immediate, and the corrected version appeared in the next retelling.

The activity also generated humour that made the language more memorable. One group, relaying Attenborough's line «Surely working together, we are powerful enough to save the planet», enthusiastically declared: «...powerful enough to save the classroom». The slip provoked laughter, but peers corrected instantly: «...to save the planet». The phrase was repeated several times, and the playful mistake became a running joke in subsequent lessons. This anecdote illustrates how affective engagement can reinforce linguistic noticing: the humorous error made the target form more salient than a conventional explanation ever could.

By the end of the session, the class compiled a list of “most powerful quotes” on the board. Some were close to the originals, others had been reshaped through repeated paraphrasing. The favourites often showcased parallelism and rhythm, such as «We must stop, we must change, we must work together», which appeared in several variations. These outcomes confirmed that even simplified interlanguage versions of the quotes could preserve rhetorical force.

From a theoretical perspective, Step 8 demonstrates how task-based pedagogy can foster implicit attention to form. Learners' focus was firmly on meaning, evaluating which quotes were most powerful. At the same time, the communicative need to paraphrase and relay ensured that rhetorical devices such as dummy *it*, clefts, and parallelism were noticed. According to Schmidt's (1990) noticing hypothesis, awareness arises most effectively when forms are tied to communicative purpose; Long's (1996) model further explains how peer correction and teacher recasts sustain interlanguage development.

In conclusion, the “quoterelay” combined humour, authentic input, and collaborative decision-making in a way that reinforced the project's central principle that language forms become learnable when embedded in authentic, socially meaningful tasks. The non-linguistic outcome (a collaboratively chosen list of powerful quotes) was modest in appearance. Yet, it encapsulated the step's real achievement: learners had begun to appropriate rhetorical grammar into their interlanguage, discovering that powerful words can be both repeated and reshaped in the classroom. The following example reframes how a quote could develop during relays.

Original (Attenborough):

«We must halt carbon emissions this decade»

First relay (interlanguage):

«We must stop the carbon this decade»

Second relay (further simplified):

«We must stop carbon now»

Teacher recast during reporting:

«Yes, we must halt carbon emissions this decade»

Final version voted by group:

«We must stop carbon emissions now»

This trajectory illustrates how the meaning remained constant, while forms shifted, simplified, and were gradually brought closer to target-like structures through peer negotiation and teacher reformulation.

### 7.10 STEP 9: INSPIRATIONAL DOCUMENTARISTS AND RHETORICAL LANGUAGE

This step shifted attention from historical narration to rhetorical style, asking learners to engage with the voices of renowned science communicators. Students watched short excerpts of speeches by Sir David Attenborough at the Glasgow Climate Summit, together with comparable clips from Jane Goodall and Piero Angela. The choice of figures was deliberate: all three exemplify different ways of combining authority, clarity, and persuasion. Learners were then asked to debate in groups which speaker they found most inspiring and why, before voting as a class for their “inspirational documentarist”. The non-linguistic outcome was a collective election, but the deeper aim was to expand learners’ linguistic repertoire by noticing and experimenting with rhetorical devices.

The activity resembled the previous reasoning-gap tasks, but here the evaluative dimension made persuasion central. The need to defend choices created a functional demand for structures that highlighted emphasis and stance. Predictably, learners began by relying on simple formulas such as «He speaks good», or «She is very clear», but soon moved towards reproducing fragments from the speeches themselves. One group noted: «He says many times ‘We must... We must...’ That is strong». Another added: «It is important that he talk about future». These early attempts, though interlanguage in form, signalled genuine attention to rhetorical patterns.

Unlike in previous implicit phases, here the teacher intervened with brief CR prompts to deepen this noticing. When a group observed the repeated use of *It is important...*, the teacher asked: «Why do you think he uses it? What happens if we only say ‘Stopping carbon is important’?» This contrast allowed learners to see how dummy *it* adds grammatical weight and rhetorical gravity. Similarly, when a student produced «What is important is we change», the teacher reformulated: «Excellent idea. Try: What is important is that we change». These interventions did not interrupt the communicative flow but ensured that the salient structures were not only noticed but explicitly discussed.

The focus on form was reinforced by the materials themselves. Extracts from Attenborough’s speech contained marked constructions such as cleft sentences («What we must do is stop»), extraposition («It is essential to act now»), and parallelism («We must halt... We must recapture... We must fix...»). Learners were encouraged to highlight these features on paper, compare them with simpler alternatives, and then experiment in their own speech. One learner, inspired by the rhythm of repetition, tried: «We must change our mind, we must change our life, we must change our future». Although slightly awkward in phrasing, the attempt captured the rhetorical

force of the model.

The election at the end provided closure and ensured that the non-linguistic outcome remained tangible. Groups presented short statements defending their chosen figure. Errors persisted (e.g., «What must we do is stop pollution») but the experimentation itself revealed progress: students were mobilising clefts and extraposition forms that they would rarely attempt spontaneously. Peer reactions showed that they appreciated not only the content but also the style: one learner commented, «He is strong because he repeat the same sentence many times», effectively identifying parallelism as a persuasive device.

The communicative task (debating and electing an inspirational speaker) created an authentic need to evaluate and persuade, while the teacher's CR interventions ensured that learners focused explicitly on marked rhetorical structures. The opinion-gap context heightened the salience of rhetorical forms and counteracted the risk of overshadowing, where attention might otherwise have been monopolised by lexis (names, facts, personal adjectives).

In sum, Step 8 combined authentic input, meaningful communicative output, and targeted CR. Learners were not only exposed to models of scientific persuasion but also guided to notice, discuss, and appropriate rhetorical devices into their own interlanguage. The non-linguistic outcome (the class election) was modest in appearance, but it encapsulated the step's achievement: it demonstrated that rhetorical grammar can be made teachable when tied to authentic, socially situated activities.

### 7.11 CONCLUDING REMARKS ON THE *SUPERQUARK* PROJECT

The *Superquark* project illustrates how a modular curriculum can be effectively operationalised in upper-secondary education to foster both communicative competence and linguistic accuracy. The *Superquark* project was carefully designed to alternate task-based and structure-based phases. The rationale was that purely task-based stages (e.g., research exchanges, rehearsals, quote relay) would prioritise fluency, creativity, and collaborative meaning-making. Meanwhile, structure-based phases (e.g., cloze activities, storyboard drafting, rhetorical noticing) introduced explicit attention to form where the communicative task created a functional need. This alternation prevented the fossilisation of errors that might occur if implicit phases dominated, while also avoiding the artificiality of decontextualised grammar instruction. By the final recording, learners were mobilising forms they had first encountered in CR activities, like clefts, dummy *it*, or the contrast between active and passive voice. This frequently happened in spontaneous and sometimes playful ways. The documentary, as a non-linguistic outcome, thus embodied the principle that sequencing task-based and structure-based phases in alternation creates cumulative affordances: implicit noticing and explicit instruction reinforced one another, ultimately enabling learners to perform complex communicative tasks with greater

accuracy and stylistic awareness.

From the perspective of second language acquisition, the project created conditions favourable to language development by providing multiple opportunities for negotiation of meaning (Long 1996), noticing the gap (Schmidt 1990), and the gradual automation of procedural discourse (DeKeyser 2025). Learners were engaged in reasoning-gap and opinion-gap activities (Prabhu 1987), which stimulated both cognitive processing and interactional adjustments. Structural support was mobilised mostly as a context-sensitive response to issues observed in task performance, such as tense sequencing, reported speech, or pragmatic appropriateness in questioning, thereby aligning with Ellis's principle of reactive modularity.

Pedagogically, the project demonstrated the motivational potential of project-based TBLT. The culminating macro-task (the public screening of a collaboratively produced documentary) functioned as a powerful incentive. Learners worked towards a tangible outcome that had real social relevance beyond the classroom. This non-linguistic goal provided a motivational "engine" (Dörnyei/Ushioda 2021), sustaining engagement even during more demanding phases such as structural practice. The performative and multimodal nature of the task also gave learners space to mobilise non-linguistic talents (e.g., acting, editing, design), reinforcing the principles of inclusivity and individualised instruction.

The interdisciplinary dimension further enhanced the project's educational value. History and literature content was not merely translated into English but re-voiced, dramatised, and interrogated through creative formats. This bridged the disciplinary divide between language and content, resonating with CLIL principles (Coyle *et al.* 2010) while maintaining a focus on learner agency. Collaboration with subject teachers, whether explicit or implicit, legitimised the project as part of the broader curriculum and highlighted the role of language as a tool for knowledge construction across domains.

Socio-affective outcomes were equally significant. The project promoted collaboration, negotiation of roles, and shared responsibility within groups, thus fostering communicative and interpersonal competences that extend beyond language learning. The celebratory event at which the final documentary was screened also strengthened learners' sense of identity and belonging as teachers, peers, and families recognised their work. Such public recognition enhanced learner self-awareness, showing that language learning can be a source not only of academic achievement but also of personal and social empowerment.

Nonetheless, the project also revealed challenges inherent in modular task-based learning. Structural support, though essential, was often constrained by time, class size, and the diverse proficiency levels present in upper-secondary classrooms. At times, teachers resorted to more traditional exercises or improvised explanations. While this reflects the pragmatic realities of instructed learning, it highlights the need for flexible teacher expertise that can balance theoretical ideals with institutional

constraints.

The *Superquark* project culminated in a multimodal product that combined narration, role-play, interviews, and dramatised episodes, all framed within the familiar format of a cultural television programme. The overall result demonstrated not only learners' ability to convey historical content through English but also their capacity to engage creatively with diverse discourse types and registers.

The presentation was anchored by three student narrators who introduced and linked the individual documentary segments. Their role demanded fluency and clear pronunciation. It provided them with opportunities to practise expository discourse in a sustained way, an area where learners at B2 often struggle to maintain coherence (Council of Europe 2020).

A notable highlight was the “impossible interview” with King Alfred, enacted by two students who had previously displayed contrasting profiles: one quiet, demotivated, and rarely participating, while the other was oscillating between engagement and disengagement. Both performed confidently and fluently in this context, suggesting that the creative format and the authenticity of the task acted as strong motivators (Dörnyei 2005). Their ability to sustain interaction, manage turn-taking, and adopt question–answer conventions represented a tangible step forward in communicative competence.

Equally successful was the group of four female students who represented the Celts, combining dramatisation with documentary-style narration and interspersed interviews with “experts”. This hybrid format drew on multiple registers, narrative, expository, and dialogic, and fostered pragmatic flexibility (Kasper/Rose 2002). The accurate use of time expressions and descriptive vocabulary marked clear progress for learners who had previously relied on formulaic phrases in classroom discussions.

Another segment staged a mock oral examination, in which three learners interacted with a classmate impersonating their English teacher. This sequence was particularly complex, as it blended humour, parody, and content delivery. Humour is widely recognised as linguistically demanding for L2 speakers, requiring control over pragmatic cues, intonation, and shared cultural references (Bell 2011). Yet here, students successfully used irony and parody to entertain their peers while transmitting historical information, showing a rare ability to manipulate language beyond its propositional content. The scene concluded with a dream sequence where students imagined themselves struck by the plague: a creative twist that integrated narrative imagination with academic content.

Further segments included interviews with William the Conqueror and with “experts” commenting on the Norman Conquest, followed by a dramatisation of the Magna Carta. The latter combined staged dialogue between rebellious barons and King John with explanatory passages about taxation and political discontent. This segment exemplified code-shifting between dramatised performance and expository explanation, thus engaging learners in what Coyle *et al.* (2010) describe as “cognitive

discourse functions”: narrating, explaining, and arguing.

A project closed with a dramatised retelling of Beowulf, performed by two groups who represented the battles against Grendel and the Dragon. These episodes required the integration of literary narrative with performative action, challenging learners to adapt elevated narrative styles into accessible English. Their successful rendering of formulaic epic expressions («He was the strongest of men...») indicates sensitivity to genre-specific discourse features (Swales 1990).

From a linguistic perspective, the project yielded clear gains in pronunciation (e.g., correct articulation of proper names such as Magna Carta), in morphosyntax (reduced omission of auxiliaries in interrogatives and past tense narration), and in lexical range (e.g., thematic vocabulary connected to medieval history and literature). Culturally, it encouraged learners to appropriate historical content through creative recontextualisation. Socially, it fostered collaboration, mutual support, and confidence in using English as a medium for performance.

In conclusion, the *Superquark* project demonstrates that modular project work can deliver gains not only in linguistic competence but also in motivation, intercultural awareness, and pedagogical inclusivity. By placing learners in charge of meaningful, creative, and socially relevant productions, while scaffolding accuracy through selective structural intervention, the approach redefines the classroom as a site where language is both the medium and the message, both the instrument and the object of learning.

## 8. FROM QUESTIONS TO INSIGHTS: FINAL REFLECTIONS

This final chapter gathers the threads of the inquiry and brings them back to the guiding questions posed in the Introduction: *Should instruction be primarily task-based, fostering implicit knowledge through communicative use, or structure-based, guaranteeing explicit attention to forms?* And also, *which structures should be privileged? In what order? To what end?* And finally, *How can teaching respond to institutional constraints?* These questions have long animated debates in SLA and ELT, yet they are revisited here through the lens of classroom practice and project-based modular design that extend beyond the examples discussed in chapters. 5, 6, and 7.

The answers offered are not definitive, nor could they be, given the complexity of English language learning and the diversity of contexts in which it unfolds. What they aim to provide instead are insights: principled ways of thinking about grammar, sequencing, communicative purpose, and accountability that arise from actual teaching experience and are grounded in research.

By reframing the discussion in this way, this chapter does not simply summarise findings but seeks to move beyond them. It situates project-based modularity within the broader pedagogical debate, highlights both its affordances and its constraints, and points to future directions for curriculum design. What follows, then, is not a conclusion in the narrow sense but an invitation to reimagine what language instruction can look like when learners are seen as communicators, teachers as designers and scientific observers, and classrooms as spaces where meaning-making takes precedence over coverage.

### 8.1 ADDRESSING THE OPEN QUESTION

In the introduction to this book, I posed a question that has long shaped the debate in Second Language Acquisition and English Language Teaching:

Should instruction be primarily task-based, fostering implicit knowledge through communicative use, or structure-based, guaranteeing explicit attention to forms?

This question is not only theoretical. It is also the everyday challenge faced by

teachers who work under curricular mandates, assessment pressures and institutional expectations. In my own teaching of English in Italian upper-secondary schools, I have repeatedly experienced how difficult it is to balance these competing demands. Learners, teachers and institutions often have competing priorities, and the classroom becomes the site where these tensions collide.

The question of which of these seemingly opposites is best has created a well-established scholarly debate.

As discussed in Chapter 1, Long (2015) and Ellis (2003b, 2019, 2024), among others, have argued that tasks create optimal conditions for the growth of implicit knowledge, which underpins fluent and spontaneous communication. Yet research also shows that certain structures are persistently resistant to incidental learning. Articles, passives, conditionals or third-person singular -s, for example, often remain unstable, and explicit form-focused instruction can indeed help stabilise them (Han 2004; N. Ellis 2017, 2018; Rogers/Yang 2024). Teachers know from experience that ignoring structure leads to fossilisation or repeated communicative breakdowns. The challenge lies in translating theoretical debates into the small but crucial choices that shape classroom practice.

The difficulty is heightened when attention turns to the sequencing of tasks and forms, that is, to the order in which they should be addressed in the classroom. As Ellis himself observes, task sequencing remains «as much an art as a science» (2019: 469). Supporters of structural syllabi have long assumed that if forms are introduced in a carefully planned order, whether based on frequency, simplicity or communicative value, learners will acquire language facts in that same order.. Interlanguage research demonstrates the opposite (Ellis 2008, Ellis *et al.* 2009; Han 2004). Learners' development is uneven and recursive (U-shaped). For example, errors with the plural -s can still occur at intermediate stages, while advanced forms such as extraposition can appear surprisingly early if communication demands them and if the learner's L1 uses structurally similar constructions. Teachers, therefore, navigate between the neat logic of a syllabus and the unpredictable reality of learner production.

Institutional constraints further intensify this tension. In Italian secondary schools, teachers are not only educators but also evaluators. Students must obtain grades, be assessed each year to move to the next grade, and prepare for high-stakes final examinations. These requirements encourage explicit coverage because closed exercises and multiple-choice tests provide visible evidence of learning, or, realistically speaking, of covering specific topics. Communicative tasks, by contrast, often expose uneven interlanguage and are more challenging to translate into marks, even though they are more authentic indicators of competence. As Norris and Ortega's (2000) meta-analysis clearly showed, the apparent effectiveness of instruction depends heavily on the way learning is measured. Renandya (2013) selected eight factors affecting English L2 learning outcomes, and the first two being the roles of input and output. It follows that the interactions between these two factors also affects the

evaluation of learning. If assessment preferentially uses closed responses, instruction usually tends to adopt a similar shape.

This book is located in the intersection between task-based and structure-based instruction, between developmental reality and imposed sequencing, and between research insights and institutional constraints. The projects I have presented were not conceived in idealised conditions. They were not an attempt to stage a pure version of TBLT detached from school life. Rather, they emerged from the need to reconcile acquisitional processes with the pragmatic realities of teaching in constrained contexts.

Ellis's modular curriculum (2019, 2024) offered the theoretical basis and the legitimacy for practices that many teachers had already developed intuitively. By recognising that implicit and explicit knowledge follow different routes and require distinct treatments, modularity reframed the debate. The key insight is that implicit and explicit knowledge are not two stages of the same process but distinct systems, each requiring its own pedagogical treatment. Within this dichotomy, the task-based strand takes priority, since communication and interaction create the conditions for implicit learning. The structure-based strand, meanwhile, has a remedial and supportive function. It offers explicit resources that help learners notice, compare, and monitor forms that resist incidental acquisition. Crucially, the two strands are not collapsed into an eclectic mixture but run in parallel, alternating as classroom conditions require. The question is therefore no longer whether to choose tasks or structures, but how to balance and sequence them as complementary strands. My contribution has been to show that projects provide a fertile environment for this balance. Within projects, the two strands coexist without collapsing into eclecticism, and institutional constraints can be reimagined as design parameters rather than obstacles.

The conclusion now turns to the next two questions.

- If both strands are necessary, which structures should be taught, in what sequence, and for what purpose?
- And how can such decisions be made in institutional settings where grades, examinations and societal expectations still determine much of classroom practice?

In what follows, I will attempt to answer these questions in light of the evidence derived from the research presented herein.

## 8.2 WHICH STRUCTURES?

For decades, syllabi have attempted to address this question by providing ordered lists of grammatical items, often arranged by supposed simplicity or communicative frequency. Yet the evidence of SLA suggests that acquisition does not unfold in such a linear fashion. Learners do not progress neatly from one structure to another. Instead, forms reappear, stabilise only gradually, and sometimes emerge randomly

when communicative pressure makes them salient.

My own response to this dilemma was to draw on Ellis’s (2019) proposal of a checklist rather than a prescriptive syllabus. As Ellis explains, «the essential difference between a syllabus and a checklist is that the former specifies both what is to be taught and the order in which it is taught whereas the latter consists only of a list of items with no expectation that teachers will follow the order in which the items are listed or, indeed, teach all of the items» (2019: 470). In other words, the checklist functions not as a rigid syllabus but as a resource, a repertoire of forms that research has shown to be persistently problematic, which teachers can draw on when they become critical to task performance. Ellis (2024: 10) reinforces this point by noting that the structured component consists of a checklist of linguistic problems that learners are likely to show evidence of, along with a bank of teaching materials designed to address them. Crucially, the choice of which forms to target is not predetermined but guided by what teachers actually observe in their learners’ output. The role of explicit teaching, therefore, is reactive rather than proactive, supplementing task-based work with remedial support whenever fossilisation risks arise.

In my research, the checklist served as a baseline reference point, identifying recurrent structures that research and classroom practice showed to be resistant to incidental acquisition: the plural and third-person singular -s, past tense, articles, passives, conditionals, reported speech, modals, discourse markers, and stylistically marked features such as extraposition or clefts. The checklist was never intended as a staircase of stages to be climbed. It was a flexible diagnostic tool that could be adapted to different classes and different projects. At times, early and late items appeared together in the same project. At other times, items initially absent from the checklist, such as comparatives and superlatives, proved essential for particular communicative tasks and were therefore added. To make this dynamic more visible, Table 1 maps in which projects and in how many of their steps specific items from the checklist were addressed through explicit form-focused instruction across the three projects. The table is not intended as a syllabus, but as a record of those points at which structural features emerged with sufficient salience to justify explicit attention.

<i>Structures on the checklist</i>	<i>Ad Challenge</i>		<i>World Recipe</i>		<i>Superquark</i>	
	Explicit FFI		Explicit FFI		Explicit FFI	
Plural -s	1	Step 6			1	Step 9
Past tense			1	Step 6	2	Steps 2, 9
Third person singular	2	Steps 3, 6				
Articles	1	Step 3				
Modals (also epistemic)					1	Step 5
Passive voice			1	Step 4	1	Step 2

Conditionals	1	Step 3				
Reported Speech					(1)	Step 1
Discourse Markers			2	Step 4, 6		
Subject-Verb Inversion					1	Step 9
<i>Structures that were not on the list, but were integrated into it</i>						
Comparatives/Superlatives	1	Steps 3, 6				
IPA transcriptions to observe lexical variants across space			1	Step 2		

**tab. 1.** *Structures and Explicit Form-Focused Instruction (FFI) across the three Projects.*

What this distribution makes clear is that the structures were addressed at some point, whether through explicit CR activities, targeted exercises, or more implicit interventions such as recasts. Moreover, the adaptive use of the structural checklist is evident in the inclusion of features not originally listed. Comparatives, for instance, entered *The Ad Challenge* because of their central role in persuasive communication and because Italian learners struggle with their morphology. Likewise, the focus on IPA and lexical variants in *World Recipes* emerged from the semantic field of food and the intercultural reflections it prompted. In contrast, reported speech, though trialled in the *Superquark* project, ultimately proved less suitable for explicit FFI at these levels (from A2+ to B2 globally), as the cognitive load outweighed communicative benefit. It was therefore better addressed incidentally, through recasts or within broader work on tense and narration.

In this sense, the question of what to teach cannot be answered in isolation from why and to what end. Structures are not taught for their own sake, nor to check boxes on a syllabus. They are taught explicitly when their absence or misuse creates communicative gaps, risks fossilisation, or undermines pragmatic appropriateness. *The Ad Challenge* project made this visible. Comparatives, superlatives, imperatives and conditionals were not just “forms” but tools for persuasion: they gave learners the linguistic means to create more effective advertising. Similarly, *World Recipes* highlighted imperatives not as simple commands but as pragmatic choices that had to be moderated through hedging or modals in order to sound polite and collaborative. In the *Superquark* project, rhetorical devices such as dummy *it*, clefts and extraposition were not abstract grammar points but resources for constructing convincing narratives and explanations.

Taken together, these outcomes confirm Ellis’s view (2019, 2024) that a checklist provides guidance, not prescription. The order in which structures are addressed is neither linear nor predetermined but responsive to learner readiness, project

demands, and communicative necessity. The ultimate rationale is not coverage but functionality: grammar is introduced when it enables learners to achieve something they could not otherwise accomplish at all or well enough, and when its absence would compromise the success of the task or the credibility of the final product. The order, therefore, cannot be dictated by the checklist but must emerge from the communicative needs of the task and of the learner. This is evident when looking more closely at specific structures and their treatment across projects. A limitation of the checklist, when applied within task-based projects, is that not all items are always integrated seamlessly into the communicative flow of a task. Some structures do not naturally lend themselves to the non-linguistic goals of the project and forcing them into the sequence risks undermining both authenticity and motivation. Reported speech, for instance, was trialled in both *World Recipes* and the *Superquark* project, but it proved challenging to sustain as an explicit focus during the task flow. At these proficiency levels (from A2+ to B2 globally) learners were still grappling with the past tense uses. The additional cognitive load of mastering reported speech made explicit instruction feel disproportionate to their communicative needs. In practice, it was more effective to address reported speech incidentally, through recasts or in connection with narrative tasks where tense marking was already in focus.

This experience suggests that the checklist can guide attention, but its items cannot be treated as obligatory content. Their value depends on timing, context, communicative salience, and task setting. This calls for the design of structure-based phases that are not only coherent with the broader project but also versatile enough to elicit multiple linguistic features. Striking this balance is far from straightforward: it is a “tricky game” that requires both educational creativity and sensitivity to learners’ developmental needs. Yet it is also possible. For instance, in the *World Recipes* project, the same task of reconstructing a recipe could be exploited to highlight imperatives at a basic level, conditionals or extraposition at a more advanced one. This adaptability shows that while the checklist cannot dictate the path, it can still serve as a flexible resource to be mobilised when the communicative context makes it meaningful.

All in all, the answer to which structures cannot be reduced to a fixed list is best understood as those forms that, at a given moment, enable learners to communicate more effectively, prevent fossilisation, or enhance pragmatic appropriateness.

### 8.3 IN WHAT ORDER?

If both strands are needed, the next question concerns the order of sequencing. Here, it is important to distinguish between two different senses of order. On the one hand, there is the order of the grammatical structures themselves. This point has already been addressed with reference to the checklist: structures do not follow a fixed sequence, but appear, reappear, and stabilise according to learners’ communicative needs and developmental readiness. On the other hand, there is the order of

instructional strands. Should a project begin with explicit grammar work, or should it begin with communicative use?

Ellis’s weak interface hypothesis (2005, 2019, 2024) provides a useful framework. According to this view, implicit and explicit knowledge are supported by distinct cognitive processes and cannot be collapsed into one another. However, explicit knowledge can still play a supportive role: it can sharpen noticing, assist monitoring, and offer resources for problem-solving. In practical terms, this means that task-based instruction, which fosters communication and builds implicit competence, and structure-based instruction, which secures accuracy through explicit focus, are both necessary. Again, the question is how to order them.

Ellis (2019) describes three main options. The first is to run the structural and task-based strands in parallel from the beginning to the end of the programme. The second is to place the structural strand first, giving learners explicit grounding before they engage in fluency-building tasks. The third, which Ellis considers the most compatible with acquisitional research, is to adopt a task-first orientation. In this model, learners begin with tasks that prioritise meaning and communication. The structural component then enters later as a reactive strand, supporting learners once basic proficiency has been established and specific gaps or persistent errors have become visible. This third option has shaped my own practice. In all three projects, I began with task-based work to build motivation and establish a sense of purpose. I concluded with a task-based macro-task as the culmination of the communicative journey. Between these points, structure-based phases were interwoven, either after task-based cycles or in closer alternation, depending on the demands of the project and the context. The aim was to maintain momentum while still providing learners with timely opportunities to reflect on form. Table 2 illustrates how this sequencing unfolded in practice across the three projects:

Project	Sequencing Pattern (Task-based: TB and Structure-based: SB)
<i>The Ad Challenge</i>	Cycle 1 (TB → TB → SB) → Cycle 2 (TB → TB → SB) → Cycle 3 (TB → TB → TB)
<i>World Recipes</i>	TB → SB → TB → SB → TB → SB → TB
<i>Superquark</i>	TB → SB → TB → TB → SB → TB → SB → TB → SB → TB

**tab. 2.** *Sequencing of Strands in the three Project-Based Modular Designs*

What emerges from this mapping is that sequencing was never rigidly pre-set. In *Ad Challenge*, the pattern leaned towards longer cycles of task-based work before structural phases were introduced, which placed greater emphasis on implicit learning. In *World Recipes* and *Superquark*, by contrast, the alternation between task-based and structure-based phases was quicker, so that learners received structural scaffolding

in closer rhythm with their communicative work. In all three cases, however, the principle remained the same: projects opened with task-based phases, which generated initial motivation and communicative flow, and they culminated in a task-based macro-task. The supported phases in between acted as temporary scaffolds, always embedded within a trajectory that moved from task to task.

At this stage, I do not wish to claim that one sequencing pattern is inherently superior to the other. Establishing that would require empirical comparisons, such as measuring learner gains with complexity-accuracy-fluency indexes, analysing interaction through discourse analysis, and collecting systematic perception data from students and teachers exposed to different models. What can be observed for now is that the longer task-first cycles of *Ad Challenge* created space for implicit experimentation, which suited the lower proficiency level of that class. In contrast, the quicker alternation of *World Recipes* and the *Superquark* project seemed to sustain energy and motivation more actively across more demanding projects. Therefore, establishing a unique sequencing pattern would reduce the context-, content- learner-sensitive flexibility that is naturally required based on the nature of the project to be implemented.

Seen in this way, the purpose of structural teaching becomes clearer. It is not simply meant to guarantee coverage or to prepare for discrete-point tests. Its role is to provide timely support that enables learners to move forward, to prevent fossilisation, and to enrich their communicative repertoires. Structures are sequenced not because of their place in an ideal syllabus, but because they serve a communicative or developmental need at a given moment. This is precisely the logic of Ellis's Option 3 (2019), which I adopt in practice: task-first, structure-second, with communication always at the centre, and explicit teaching mobilised to help the project advance.

Thus, the most defensible answer to the question of the order issue is that instruction begins with tasks and culminates in tasks, while structural work enters in between as needed, always in service of the communicative journey and the achievement of the final product.

#### 8.4 TO WHAT END?

The final question is to what end such alternation of task orientation and structural attention should be pursued. Here, the answer lies in the nature of language itself. The ultimate purpose of language teaching is not the mastery of isolated forms but the ability to act through language. Task-based pedagogy makes this explicit: its goals are framed as non-linguistic outcomes. Learners design adverts, film recipes, or narrate documentaries, and in striving to achieve these objectives, they mobilise their linguistic repertoires in authentic ways.

Within project work, this mobilisation extends further. Learners do not draw only on grammar and vocabulary, but also on cultural knowledge, creativity, problem-

solving skills, and collaborative capacities. Projects, therefore, become microcosms where language is both the medium and the product of meaningful action. In this sense, language instruction prepares learners not only for linguistic performance but also for participation in broader spheres of life, including academic, professional, and civic contexts.

This perspective acquires particular resonance in the case of the English language. As Seidlhofer (2011), Mauranen (2012), and Jenkins (2015) have shown, English now functions as a global lingua franca. It no longer belongs solely to its native speakers but serves as a shared resource for intercultural communication. In contemporary contexts, English is not simply another subject in the school curriculum. It is a medium for living in the world, for engaging in participatory exchange, and for interacting with the cultural, social, and professional realities that surround learners. This role makes the communicative purpose of instruction even more crucial: to equip students with the ability to engage in dialogue with others, to collaborate across borders, and to use language as a tool for action in global society.

Taken together, these reflections suggest that the objective of instruction is twofold. It aims to equip learners with the means to communicate effectively and confidently, and to provide them with the broader abilities to act as social agents in their communities and beyond.

Thus, the most coherent answer to the goal of instruction is that it should enable learners not only to express themselves in another language but to participate meaningfully in modern society.

In sum, the three guiding questions can be answered in broad but principled terms.

- The linguistic “structures” worthy of attention are not those dictated by a fixed sequence of forms, but those that surface as communicative challenges and can be exploited as opportunities for learning.
- The “order” in which they appear is best conceived as task-first and structure-second, with sequencing shaped by project goals and learner needs rather than by a predetermined syllabus.
- The “end” of this endeavour is not accuracy for its own sake, but the capacity/ability to use language as a means of action, participation, and engagement in academic, professional, and civic life.

## 8.5 IMPLICATIONS: TOWARDS A PROJECT-BASED TASK-CENTRED MODULAR CURRICULUM (PBTCCM)

One of the most substantial implications of this research is the possibility of reimagining language curricula not as inventories of forms but as repertoires of tasks. Rather than sequencing grammar points by supposed simplicity or frequency, a curriculum could be organised around purposeful communicative goals, with linguistic forms treated as resources that learners can mobilise in order to accomplish

those goals. This vision resonates with the CEFR’s action-oriented perspective, where learners are conceived as “social agents” engaged in tasks within real-world domains (Council of Europe 2020). It also aligns with SLA research that has long urged a shift from structural syllabi to task-centred organisation (Long 2015; Ellis 2019, 2024).

The rationale is straightforward: communication begins from meaning, not from grammar. If the objective is to create a slogan for an advert, learners may draw on imperatives, comparatives, rhetorical questions, or cleft sentences, depending on their linguistic repertoires and creative intentions. The same principle applies to tasks like designing a recipe video, producing a documentary, setting up a restaurant with a themed menu, or planning a tourist package. What matters is that the macro-task is completed in a way that is meaningful to the learners and credible to their audience. To force a learner to use, for example, a conditional when an imperative better serves their communicative aim is to confuse means with ends.

This principle can be visualised in Table 3, which illustrates the distinction between macro-tasks (the communicative outcomes around which a curriculum could be built) and the possible canvas tasks that support them.

<i>Macro-task (final communicative outcome)</i>	<i>Canvas-tasks (intermediate communicative activities)</i>	<i>Checklist with possible linguistic resources (examples, not prescriptions)</i>	<i>Teacher tools (Task- tank guidebook and Resource pack - Mary Poppins’ Bag)</i>
Create an advert for a product (poster, slogan, video)	Guessing game... Find the intruder... Jigsaw puzzle...	Imperatives... Comparatives / superlatives... Conditionals... Rhetorical devices...	Task-tank guidebook with adaptable task-based and task-supported ideas; Resource pack (Mary Poppins’ Bag) with props and reusable materials.
Produce a recipe video (dish + oral presentation)	Sequencing scrambled steps... Spot the difference... Information gap...	Sequencing markers... Passives... Modals for politeness...	Task-tank guidebook with adaptable task-based and task-supported ideas; Resource pack (Mary Poppins’ Bag) with props and reusable materials.

Make a documentary (history, culture, science)	Jigsaw research... Quote relay... Interview roleplay...	Past tense... Reported speech... Discourse markers... Cleft sentences...	Task-tank guidebook with adaptable task-based and task-supported ideas; Resource pack (Mary Poppins' Bag) with props and reusable materials.
Design a restaurant and menu (concept + presentation)	Find the intruder (ingredients)... Menu categorisation... Negotiation game...	Quantifiers... Articles... Conditionals...	Task-tank guidebook with adaptable task-based and task-supported ideas; Resource pack (Mary Poppins' Bag) with props and reusable materials.
Plan a tourist package (brochure, oral pitch)	Spot the difference (maps, routes)... Matching task (activities, places)... Guessing game (destinations)...	Prepositions... Comparatives... Modals of possibility...	Task-tank guidebook with adaptable task-based and task-supported ideas; Resource pack (Mary Poppins' Bag) with props and reusable materials.

**tab. 3.** *Illustrative Framework of a Project-based Task-centred Modular Curriculum (PBTMC).*

This table shows that the unit of curriculum design is not a grammatical or functional point but a macro-task, while canvas tasks provide flexible scaffolds to reach that macro-goal. The linguistic forms are not predetermined but emerge as resources to be drawn on reactively, in line with Ellis's conception of modularity.

This approach also reframes what textbooks of the future could look like. Instead of linear units built around grammatical structures (present simple → present progressive → past simple), a task-centred curriculum would be accompanied by resource packs, that is flexible, reusable collections of tools that allow teachers to set up a wide variety of task designs. These could include plastic fruit, toy utensils, flashcards, 3D glasses, game boards, cue cards, maps, tickets, dice, flags, costumes, miniature clothes, or other types of everyday objects. Alongside the pack, teachers would receive a task-tank guidebook, a short manual mapping possible tasks that each resource could facilitate.

The lists of linguistic resources are intentionally open-ended (...), since each teacher can decide which features to emphasise depending on learner needs and project salience. As for the last column, each macro-task is supported by a Task-tank Guidebook (with task-based and task-supported ideas) and by the Mary Poppins' Resource Pack, a flexible collection of props, cue cards, visual aids, and everyday

objects that can be adapted to different communicative goals (e.g. menus and food props for recipes, maps and brochures for tourist packages, costumes and cue cards for adverts and documentaries).

I like to imagine this resource pack as a kind of “Mary Poppins’ Bag”, which symbolises a flexible resource pack that teachers can draw on to support multiple task designs. Like the famous bottomless bag, it is not prescriptive but generative: each object can be repurposed for a range of communicative activities, depending on the macro-task. It may contain as many props as needed, allowing selection from a wider range than the list suggested before. These simple props enable versatile canvas tasks like guessing games, spot the difference, find the intruder, jigsaw exchanges, story sequencing, or script drafting. Their pedagogical function is to spark curiosity, create information or opinion gaps, and provide tangible entry points into the communication process. In this way, the bag helps teachers move beyond rigid textbooks and instead design playful yet purposeful activities that support both task-based and task-supported phases. The “magic” lies not in the resource itself but in how it can be adapted to serve different projects and different classes.

Examples from my own projects illustrate how this operates in practice. In *The Ad Challenge*, a guessing game required one learner to hold a hidden picture while classmates tried to identify it through questions. The cue cards prompted conditionals («If this falls, it breaks»), comparatives («It is heavier than a book»), or superlatives («It is the lightest object here»). The linguistic focus shifted according to level, but the non-linguistic goal remained fixed: to identify the hidden object and score points. Because the competitive and playful element took centre stage, learners never perceived this as a grammar drill, but as an authentic communicative game.

Other canvas tasks demonstrate the same versatility. *Find the intruder* invites learners to justify why an item does not belong in a set, eliciting comparatives, modals, or discourse markers, depending on how the teacher frames the activity. *Spot the difference*, based on two near-identical pictures, can be used to practise present continuous, prepositions, or relative clauses, while retaining the genuine communicative aim of negotiating shared meaning. *Jigsaw tasks*, where each learner holds a piece of information necessary to complete a whole, can be adapted to narrative sequencing in the past tense, modal speculation, or conditionals. These are not grammar exercises in disguise but communicative canvases that can accommodate different linguistic content or be unfocused, depending on what emerges as conducive to the project.

Taken together, these examples show that a task-centred curriculum is not about discarding form but about relocating it. Grammar and vocabulary enter the picture reactively, when they help learners overcome communicative obstacles, expand repertoires, or refine the quality of their output. This maintains the authenticity of the task while ensuring that linguistic growth is not left to chance.

In practice, this orientation also redefines the teacher’s role. Working through projects revealed unexpected communicative skills in my students, which would have remained invisible if instruction had been limited to a linear syllabus. Rather than leading learners “by the hand”, project work positioned me alongside them, observing how they drew on their own resources, surprised themselves, and grew into autonomous communicators. The teacher’s task, then, is not to impose prefabricated forms but to equip learners with canvases: spaces where implicit growth and explicit reflection can coexist, and where the ultimate goal is not grammatical mastery but communicative action.

In this sense, a task-centred curriculum functions like an open playground or sandbox: learners are free to draw on their repertoires, to contribute in ways that reflect their voices, and to release their creativity without fear of constraint. Teachers, too, are liberated to bring in their own creativity and professional judgement, turning the classroom into a space of shared exploration rather than rigid prescription.

## 8.6 REFRAMING THE HORIZON: LIMITATIONS, FUTURE DIRECTIONS, AND CLOSING THOUGHTS

No pedagogical proposal, however promising, can be exempt from limitations. The project-based, task-centred modular curriculum (PBTMC) outlined in these pages is no exception. Its implementation is far from straightforward: it requires teachers, learners, and institutions to adopt a different mindset, one that values communicative ends over structural coverage and trusts projects as legitimate pathways to language growth. For many, this shift may feel ambitious, even unrealistic at first. Yet, as SLA scholarship has repeatedly noted (Samuda/Bygate 2008; Long 2015; Bygate 2016; Van den Branden 2016; Ellis 2019, 2024), pedagogical change often begins with small, principled steps rather than sweeping reforms. A teacher who integrates one project per term, or even one project day per week, has already begun to open new possibilities while remaining aligned with institutional curricula and accountability structures.

The resource question remains equally pressing. At present, Italian schools (like many others worldwide) are dominated by traditional textbooks, which consume vast amounts of paper and impose considerable costs on families. The question arises: do we truly need such textbooks in their current form? Could publishers reimagine their products, not abandoning the market but reorienting it? A task-centred alternative might consist of “resource packs”, collections of reusable handouts, props, and multimodal materials, paired with a “task-tank guidebook” to inspire both task-based and task-supported activities. Such packs could still be sold in print or digitally, generating revenue while drastically reducing costs for families. Some resource pack booklets with photocopyable handouts already exist, but they have rarely reached the mainstream market. Perhaps this is because their commercial value has been underestimated, even though their pedagogical value is high. The “Mary Poppins’

Bag” metaphor captures this well: what teachers need is not a prescriptive book, but a versatile kit they can open to surprise, engage, and support their learners.

A further challenge concerns physical space. In Italy, it is still common for language teachers to move from class to class, teaching in rooms designed for other subjects. This undermines the creation of a dedicated “language space” that can function as a laboratory of communication. A classroom filled with resources, where students come to meet the teacher, would not only provide a more suitable physical environment but also free mental space for teachers to experiment, create, and design innovative lessons. Even before curricular reform, this infrastructural change could mark a decisive step towards higher-quality language education.

From a research perspective, what has been presented here remains exploratory and has no pre-set expectations. The projects demonstrate feasibility, but broader studies are needed to test scalability across different age groups, proficiency levels, and institutional contexts. Future work should integrate more systematic data collection, combining quantitative measures (e.g., complexity–accuracy–fluency, CAF) with qualitative insights (e.g., discourse analysis, learner and teacher perceptions). Pilot studies at the university level, some of which I am already conducting, will hopefully provide further evidence to refine and expand the model.

In conclusion, the limitations of the PBTMC are real, but so too are its possibilities. If tasks are recognised not as exercises but as meaningful actions, if resource packs replace rigid textbooks, and if classrooms become spaces of creativity rather than constraint, then language teaching can move closer to its real purpose: enabling learners to act through language in ways that are authentic, participatory, and transformative. My hope is that this book has successfully documented some attempts at reconciling theory and practice but has also contributed to a wider debate about the future of language pedagogy.

To borrow the metaphor of the sandbox used earlier: the task-centred curriculum is not a finished structure but a space where teachers and learners can play, build, and rebuild together. It is an invitation to imagine classrooms where communication, creativity, and collaboration flourish side by side. That, in the end, is the message I wish to leave with the reader: the future of language education will not be built on rigid syllabi, but on the courage to design, adapt, and play.

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