

Task-based interaction

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The 'task' has become a fundamental concept in language teaching pedagogy. However, there is a lack of studies which present a 'holistic' analysis and evaluation of the interaction produced by tasks in the classroom. Based on a database of lesson extracts, this article attempts to characterize task-based interaction as a variety, discusses its pedagogical and interactional advantages and disadvantages, and considers what kinds of learning it might be promoting.

Introduction

The recent history of second language teaching methodology has seen a shift away from the consideration of teaching methods in isolation towards a focus on classroom interaction as the most vital element in the instructed second language learning process. Developments in recording technology have resulted in recent studies (Johnson 1995, Lynch 1996) which have conducted analyses of L2 classroom communication illustrated by transcripts of interaction.

During the same period we have seen the rise of the 'task' as a fundamental concept in L2 teaching methodology and materials and course design (Nunan 1991). There are many different definitions of 'task' in applied linguistics: see, for example, the discussion in Nunan (1989: 5). The definition of task adopted in this article follows Willis (1990: 127): 'By a task I mean an activity which involves the use of language but in which the focus is on the outcome of the activity rather than on the language used to achieve that outcome.' The theoretical bases and pedagogical arguments for task-based learning appear very strong. According to Breen (1987: 161) the task-based syllabus '... approaches communicative knowledge as a unified system wherein any use of the new language requires the learner to continually match choices from his or her linguistic repertoire to the social requirements and expectations governing communicative behaviour and to meanings and ideas he wishes to share'. Willis (1990: 130) suggests that 'The most dynamic element in the process is the learner's creativity. By exploiting rather than stifling that creativity, we make learning vastly more efficient.'

Given the contemporary development of these two trends—task-based teaching, and the analysis of L2 classroom extracts—one might have expected that there would be a plethora of studies demonstrating the advantages of task-based interaction by means of analysis of transcripts of the interaction, and producing concrete evidence that the theoretical benefits are delivered in practice in the classroom. However, the surprising thing about studies of task-based teaching is the lack of evidence in the form of lesson transcripts to confirm those benefits which are claimed for tasks. Prabhu (1987), for example, promotes the

advantages of task-based teaching, as opposed to structural teaching, in a book-length study. Turning to the 'transcripts of project lessons' (ibid. 123–37) one might therefore expect to find transcripts of impressive task-based interaction. In fact, while there are transcripts of 'pre-task stages of a lesson' (which contain exclusively teacher-led question and answer sequences) one finds no examples of task-based interaction at all! In another book-length study, Willis (1990) promotes task-based teaching (and the lexical syllabus). The author examines transcripts of a structural lesson, and is highly critical of the interaction (pp. 1–4). One might, therefore, also expect to find transcripts of task-based lessons, together with some discussion of the ways in which task-based interaction is superior. As with Prabhu, however, we do not find any transcripts of task-based lessons. This is not to suggest that there are no studies of task-based learning which contain some transcripts of task-based interaction; such studies do exist.¹ However, I am unable to locate any studies which aim to demonstrate, by a holistic analysis of the interaction, the benefits of task-based interaction.² This is a very puzzling omission, and worthy of investigation.

What are the characteristics of task-based interaction?

I am working from a database of published and unpublished transcripts of approximately 330 L2 lessons or fragments of lessons from 14 different countries. The database includes many extracts from task-based lessons, as well as a small number of whole lessons involving task-based interaction. It is not, of course, suggested that all task-based interaction is the same.³ However, by analysing such a wide variety of transcripts from so many different educational settings, some general characteristics and recurrent patterns begin to emerge in relation to what might be termed 'task-based interaction'. Indeed, we will see that task-based interaction as a variety has certain striking and distinctive characteristics. As a rule, the teacher withdraws after allocating tasks to the learners, to allow them to manage the interaction themselves. However, since the teachers often move around the class, monitoring the interaction and sometimes intervening, if the students are having difficulty with the task they can ask for help. The learners must communicate with each other in order to accomplish a task, and the pedagogical and interactional focus is on the accomplishment of the task rather than on the language used. This is in accordance with Willis's previously cited definition of task. As we have already noted, there are numerous definitions of 'task', and this study may not apply to all kinds of task. Duff (1986) distinguishes between 'convergent' tasks, such as those illustrated here, and 'divergent' tasks, such as discussion and debate. Looking at lesson data, however, my view is that discussion and debate produce a different variety from task-based interaction; this article does not deal with discussion or debate.

1) The turn-taking system is constrained by the nature of the task

When analysing the different varieties of interaction which occur in the L2 classroom, I found (Seedhouse 1996) that each variety has a distinct pedagogical focus, and a turn-taking system which is suited to that pedagogical focus. In the case of task-based interaction, the pedagogical

focus is on the accomplishment of the task, and I found that participants use a turn-taking system suited to the efficient accomplishment of the task. In effect, the task constrains the nature of the turn-taking system which the learners use. Since this may sound rather abstract, I would like to show how this works in practice by looking at the interaction produced by tasks in Warren (1985). I will quote Warren's explanation of how a particular task was to be accomplished, to illustrate how the nature of the task constrains the resultant turn-taking system.

The 'Maps' task below was based on the 'information gap' principle, and was carried out by pairs of students separated from each other by a screen. The idea was that both students had a map of the same island, but one of the maps had certain features missing from it. A key illustrating the missing features was given to each student, so that they knew what these features were. In the case of the student with the completed map, the key enabled him/her to know what was missing from the other map, and in the case of the other participant it showed how the missing features were to be represented on his/her map. The student with the completed map had to tell the other student where missing features had to be drawn. Once the activity had been completed using map 1 the roles were reversed using another map. (Warren 1985: 56)

The following extract is typical of the interaction which resulted from this task.

Extract 1

- 1 **L1:** The road from the town to the Kampong Kelantan ... the coconut =
- 2 **L2:** = Again, again.
- 3 **L1:** The road is from the town to Kampong Kelantan (7.5 sec) the town is in the
- 4 Jason Bay.
- 5 **L2:** Again. The town, where is the town?
- 6 **L1:** The town is on the Jason Bay.
- 7 **L2:** The, road?
- 8 **L1:** The road is from the town to Kampong Kelantan (11.0 sec) OK?
- 9 **L2:** OK.
- 10 **L1:** The mountain is behind the beach and the Jason Bay (8.1 sec) The river is from
- 11 the jungle to the Desaru (9.7 sec) The mou- the volcano is above the Kampong
- 12 Kelantan (7.2 sec) The coconut tree is along the beach.

(Warren 1985: 271)

The progress of the interaction is jointly constructed by the participants here. In line 1, L1 provides one item of information to L2, then without checking whether L2 has noted the first piece of information (the two learners cannot see each other), proceeds with the second item of

information. Because L2 has not finished noting the first piece of information, L2 makes (in line 2) a repetition request, which requires L1 to backtrack. In line 7, L2 asks where the road is. In line 8, L1 supplies the information, waits for 11.0 seconds, then makes a confirmation check ('OK?') to ascertain whether L2 has completed that subsection of the task. L1 appears to be orienting his utterances to L2's difficulty in completing the task, since L1 uses an identical sentence structure each time, and leaves pauses between different items of information. We can see these pauses in lines 3, 10, 11, and 12, and they vary from 7.2 seconds to 9.7 seconds in length. Repetition requests are focused on information necessary for the task in lines 2, 5, and 7. In line 8 the confirmation check is focused on establishing whether or not a particular subsection of the task has been accomplished. We can see in the above extract that the nature of the task, in effect, tends to constrain the types of turn which the learners take: the nature of the task pushes L1 to make statements to which L2 will provide feedback, clarification, repetition requests, or repair initiation. The turn-taking system is thus partly constrained. However, to some extent the two learners are also actively developing a turn-taking system which is appropriate to the task, and which excludes elements which are superfluous to the accomplishment of the task.

2) There is a tendency to minimalization and indexicality

The nature of the task also tends to constrain the kinds of linguistic forms used in the learners' turns, and there is a general tendency to minimize linguistic forms. This is evident in the extract below; it is another information-gap task in which one student has to give instructions to another student (separated by a screen) on how to lay out bricks in a pattern.

Extract 2

- 1 L1: Ready?
- 2 L2: Ready
- 3 L1: Er the blue oblong above the red oblong—eh! the yellow oblong.
- 4 L2: Alright. Faster, faster.
- 5 L1: The red cylinder beside the blue oblong.
- 6 L2: Left or right?
- 7 L1: Right.
- 8 L2: Right! ... OK.
- 9 L1: The the red cube was =
- 10 L2: = The red cube
- 11 L1: The red cube was behind the blue oblong.
- 12 L2: Blue oblong, blue oblong. Yeah.
- 13 L1: And the red cube was behind the red oblong.

(Warren 1985: 275)

L1 produces utterances from which the verb 'be' is missing, with the exception of lines 9, 11, and 13, where it is used in an inappropriate tense. This is an example of what Duff (1986: 167) calls 'topic comment constructions without syntacticized verbal elements', which are quite

common in task-based interaction. It should also be noted that omission of copulas is a feature of pidgins and creoles (Graddol, Leith, and Swann 1996: 220). There is a general tendency to minimize the volume of language used, and to produce only that which is necessary to accomplish the task. Turns tend to be relatively short, with simple syntactic constructions (Duff 1986: 167).

What we also often find in practice in task-based interaction is a tendency to produce very indexical interaction, i.e. interaction that is context-bound, inexplicit, and hence obscure to anybody reading the extracts without knowledge of the task in which the participants were engaged. Interactants in a task seem to produce utterances at the lowest level of explicitness necessary to the successful completion of the task. This is perfectly proper, of course, since the focus is on the completion of the task. Indeed, the interactants are displaying their orientation to the task through their use of minimalization and indexicality. However, L2 teachers who are reading the transcripts may tend to find the actual language produced in task-based interaction to be impoverished and esoteric. In the extract below, for example, learners are required to complete and label a geometric figure.

Extract 3

- L1:** What?
L2: Stop.
L3: Dot?
L4: Dot?
L5: Point?
L6: Dot?
LL: Point point, yeah.
L1: Point?
L5: Small point.
L3: Dot.

(Lynch 1989: 124)

The interaction produced by tasks often seems very unimpressive to L2 teachers when read in a transcript, because of these tendencies to indexicality and minimalization. The tendency to indexicality is probably not a serious problem from a pedagogical point of view. The whole point of tasks is that the learners should become immersed in the context of a task, and in any case, task-based interaction in the world outside the classroom frequently displays precisely this indexicality. However, the tendency towards minimalization may be a more significant problem as far as L2 pedagogy is concerned. It could also be argued that people engaged in tasks in the world outside the classroom often display some tendency towards minimalization, although generally not to the extent seen above. However, the point is that in classroom interaction L2 teachers want to see some evidence of the learners' linguistic competence being stretched and challenged and upgraded.⁴ The theory of task-based learning is that tasks promote this. Nunan (1988: 84), for example, suggests that two-way tasks 'stimulate learners to mobilise all

their linguistic resources, and push their linguistic knowledge to the limit'. However, what we often find in practice in task-based interaction is more or less the opposite process, with the learners producing such a minimum display of their linguistic competence that it resembles a pidgin. The learners appear to be so concentrated on completing the task that linguistic forms are treated as a vehicle of minor importance. Paradoxically, however, this is precisely as the theory says it should be, as in Willis's definition of a task (1990: 127): 'By a task I mean an activity which involves the use of language but in which the focus is on the outcome of the activity rather than on the language used to achieve that outcome.'

3) Tasks generate many instances of clarification requests, confirmation checks, comprehension checks, and self-repetitions

Given the previous section, it might seem surprising that task-based approaches should have promoted task-based interaction as particularly conducive to second language acquisition. However, proponents of task-based approaches have tended to use a methodology which presents the interaction in the most favourable light. A quantitative, segmental methodology has been used which isolates and counts individual features which happen to be abundant in task-based interaction. It is then claimed that these individual features are particularly conducive to second language acquisition, from which it follows that task-based approaches are particularly conducive to second language acquisition. The features which have generally been selected for quantitative treatment are clarification requests, confirmation checks, comprehension checks, and self-repetitions, which are all characteristic of 'modified interaction'. As we have seen in extracts 1-3, tasks do tend to generate clarification requests, confirmation checks, comprehension checks, and self-repetitions, and indeed, interactants display their orientation to the task by means of these features. According to Long (1985) and associates, modified interaction must be necessary for language acquisition. The relationship may be summarized as follows:

- 1 Interactional modification makes input comprehensible.
 - 2 Comprehensible input promotes acquisition.
- Therefore,
- 3 Interactional modification promotes acquisition.

There has been considerable criticism of the above interaction hypothesis (summarized in Ellis 1994: 278), much of it targeting the reasoning cited above, and the current consensus appears to be that the hypothesis is unproven and unprovable. Tasks certainly generate modified interaction; this may or may not be beneficial to second language acquisition. However, from the point of view of this article, what tasks actually produce is task-based interaction. This variety of interaction needs to be evaluated as a whole, from a holistic perspective, rather than by isolating individual segments of the interaction for quantification, and using a methodology which tends to be self-fulfilling.

Conclusion The aim of this article has not been to denigrate task-based interaction, but rather to sketch its characteristics as a variety of interaction, and to

balance the rosy theoretical claims with textual evidence of some of the less-than-rosy drawbacks encountered in everyday life. Tasks appear to be particularly good at training learners to use the L2 for practical purposes, and we can assume that this will prepare them well for accomplishing some tasks in the world outside the classroom. Task-based learning may be very effective within an ESP approach, in which a major aim is to train learners to perform specific 'real-world' tasks. Tasks could also form *part* of a general English approach if one is able to identify target tasks which one would like the learners to be able to perform in the world outside the classroom (Nunan 1989).

It should also be said, however, that task-based interaction is a particularly narrow and restricted variety of communication, in which the whole organization of the interaction is geared to establishing a tight and exclusive focus on the accomplishment of the task. There are a multitude of different varieties of interaction in the world outside the L2 classroom, where there is certainly a lot more to communication than 'performing tasks'. Similarly, several writers have proposed that there are various different varieties of communication which can occur in the L2 classroom, and which can be called 'contexts', or 'activity types', or 'interaction types'. In Seedhouse (1996) I attempt technical characterizations of these varieties, and conclude that each variety has its own peculiar advantages, disadvantages, and limitations from a pedagogical and interactional point of view. Despite the seemingly impressive theoretical arguments put forward to promote task-based learning, it remains to be proven that task-based interaction is more effective than other varieties of classroom interaction. This article suggests that it would be unsound to take a 'strong' task-based approach which promoted task-based interaction at the expense of the other varieties, and which took 'task' as defined here as the basis for an entire pedagogical methodology and for course and materials design. It may be time to take a more 'holistic' approach, and to examine dispassionately the pros and cons of each and every variety of L2 classroom interaction, on the basis of the interactional evidence, and on the basis of its relationship to learning processes. We could then consider, for any particular group of learners, what balance and mixture of varieties of L2 classroom interaction might be most suitable within their curriculum: we could also promote task-based interaction as one element within the mixture.

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Notes

- 1 For example, Crookes and Gass (eds.) 1993a and 1993b, Nunan 1991, Kumaravadivelu 1991, Yule, Powers and Macdonald 1992.
- 2 See, however, Yule, Powers, and Macdonald (1992), who criticize the limited research focus on linguistic features within the interaction, and suggest consideration of the communicative outcomes of the task.
- 3 The literature on tasks suggests that different kinds of tasks promote different kinds of interaction.
- 4 This is not to suggest that learning only takes place when it is 'visible' in transcripts. However, teachers in practice constantly evaluate spoken learner interaction, and treat it as evidence of progress or otherwise.

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