EXPERTS' OPINIONS ON FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Over the past years, the use of tasks to promote language development has been discussed, researched, and incorporated into many curricular innovations. In this issue, two experts in the field of English language teaching were interviewed via email on some questions which are frequently asked by those who are interested in understanding task-based instruction.

The two interviewees were:

1. Dr. Richard Donato who is an Associate Professor in the School of Education, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, U.S.A.; and

2. Dr. Dolores Parker who is currently the Academic Director at the AUA Language Center in Bangkok, Thailand.

Despite some variations in the questions asked, the two experts essentially provided comments on the topic of task-based instruction from three perspectives:

1) differences between task-based instruction and traditional teaching frameworks;

2) tasks and accuracy; and

3) task repetition and task complexity.

Richard Donato

How is task-based learning different from what we have done in the past?

In a mechanical-meaningful-communicative framework, language acquisition is viewed as a bottom-up process where new lexical items, grammatical structures, and discourse strategies are presented, drilled, and ostensibly learned before students make use of them in interpersonal communication. In this bottom-up approach, it is thought that learners need to be "front-loaded' with language information before they can make use of their new linguistic resources in language tasks that have a real communicative purpose. Moreover, learners are seen as receivers of knowledge rather than as active contributors to the learning process, constructing their understandings of language in the context of working collaboratively with others. TBI reverses this notion and takes a top-down approach to learning. Tasks introduce and incorporate appropriate language goals that learners can explore, experiment with, and use purposefully in the context of the task. In a task-based approach, students do not have to learn language first to say something interesting; they can talk about interesting topics and perform interesting tasks and, in this way, they learn about language. Thus, a task-based approach supports the view that grammar is learned in the interactive practices of a discourse community where new members can observe interactions, reflect upon them, and creatively use the language resources that constitute interactions. Tasks can be said, therefore, to mediate the learners' relationship with the language and with others.

Dolores Parker

What are the differences between the practice used in P-P-Ps (presentation-practice-production) and that which comes about through task repetition in task-based learning (TBL)?

Generally P-P-P is a prescription offered to novice teachers assuring them that a certain procedure can be followed in the classroom, and is considered by some to be teacher-centered. At the practice stage, the students do most of the talking, usually within the guidelines of the model presented in the presentation stage.

TBL is considered by some proponents to be more student-centered as the task is the primary source of input in teaching without the systematic input of model language. As language is not pre-selected by the teacher, language issues arise during the interaction among the learners. The role of the teacher is to provide support/practice after students analyze specific features of the text they used while engaged in the task.

Richard Donato

Does task-based instruction promote accuracy?

Accuracy in traditional approaches was thought to be brought about by direct teacher correction, mechanical drill and practice, and grammatical explanation. It was naively thought that if a learner was corrected, the correct information would be internalized and error would disappear. As second language acquisition research has shown us, accuracy is a process that develops over time. It is not something that happens to us by virtue of an explanation but something that we actively construct in situations where attention is drawn to some aspect of language that we need to understand, clarify, or produce. To develop accuracy requires multiple opportunities to use the language, a sense of audience to motivate public communication, and the reformulation of utterances to overcome communicative breakdowns. Accuracy is brought about by active agents who restructure their grammatical knowledge on a continual basis through analyzing forms, noticing similarities between different forms, and generalizing language knowledge. Task-based activities, if properly constructed with clear language learning goals, promote the process of developing greater accuracy, because concerns for accuracy emerge during the task and become important to those with whom we are working and communicating. In other words, accuracy is not for accuracy's sake but rather, communicating accurately is a collaborative achievement and a social necessity. This approach contrasts sharply with an approach that insists upon accuracy before learners are allowed to use language in the ways that it was intended.

Dolores Parker

What are the differences in how accuracy is focused on in the practice stage of P-P-Ps via teacher correction and how it can be encouraged through manipulating tasks?

Although fluency and acceptable language is the primary goal in P-P-P, accuracy is provided in the practice stage by controlled practice of the linguistic item(s) generally introduced one at a time in the presentation stage of P-P-P. However, there is no evidence that these items can be learned prior to language use.

TBL explores language and the emphasis is on the cognitive processing of the task rather than on form. Some pre-task preparation on the part of the teacher might aid in cueing the students into the task. The actual language focus occurs when students examine their text – consciousness-raising – and notice certain linguistic features of the language they used. If the task is too difficult, accuracy may suffer at the expense of fluency (unless the task is channeled to particular aspects of language). The trade-off is more authentic and meaningful use of language.

Richard Donato

What role does task repetition and task complexity play?

In a study I conducted with a colleague a few years ago, we found clear advantages in task repetition, that is using similar but not identical tasks repeatedly over time. In our study of three stable dyads of intermediate English-speaking learners of Spanish as an L2, performing over five similar tasks, we found a dramatic reduction in the use of the L1 (in this case English), in talk about the task (e.g., "How are we supposed to do this?" What do we do next?"), and in talking about the L2 talk (i.e., metatalk). From this perspective, learners appeared more fluent in completing the later tasks exhibiting less hesitation, tentativeness about word choices and syntactic constructions, and fewer breakdowns requiring them to fall back on their L1. Our conclusion was that time does, indeed, matter. That is, if we attempt to assess the effectiveness of a task on one instance of its use, we would misrepresent how learners grow in tasks, how their language changes, and how they collaborate to become learning environments for each other over time. In traditional approaches, this genetic perspective, i.e., change over time, is lacking. The message is clear that for those using a task-based approach, formative and dynamic assessment is critical to understanding and monitoring students' language development. Additionally, in an unpublished study, we found that when task complexity increased, learners would initially regress to previous modes of work and ways of talking but would adapt much more quickly than in previous tasks to the changing circumstances and continue to develop. As in our previous study, it is clear that an assessment of student performance on an introductory task of increased complexity might lead one to believe that students performed more poorly than before or that they could not handle the increased task demands. To the contrary, we found that increasing

complexity of tasks serves an important role in allowing learners to access previous problem-solving strategies and use them to make continual progress in their ability to complete language-based tasks.

Dolores Parker

What advantages do time-limited tasks have over P-P-Ps in developing student fluency in English?

How can tasks be adjusted to encourage the use of more complex language by students?

Actually all tasks, as well as any stage of P-P-P are time-limited. Developing fluency in a language depends on several variables such as constraints in the approach, structuring classes around functional uses of language and allowing learners to practice in freer speaking activities.

Learning tasks can be designed with several strata of complexity, moving along a continuum from less complex (more concrete) tasks to ones that are more abstract in form. Rationally sequencing tasks for learners at different levels helps ensure that learning goals will be integrated without cognitive overload. In addition, the

same task can be recycled with different learning goals.

Richard Donato

What should teachers take into consideration when incorporating task-based instruction into their language lessons?

After the previous positive discussion of TBI, it is important to caution teachers about a few possible misconceptions. First, tasks do not teach language. Language is learned by active agents who engage in tasks and transform them. No matter how carefully designed the task may be, learner agency plays a paramount role. Learner agency is revealed when we observe learners changing task requirements, modifying the language of the task, or completing the task in a way to meet personal goals. Tasks do not manipulate learners, but rather learners manipulate tasks. As many teachers have observed, it is possible that a single task can be carried out in multiple ways by different groups of students. This observation is not a weakness of TBI but a fundamental principle of human activity. People shape

the tasks that they do; a task does not shape people. For this reason, TBI provides models of meaningful interactive practices in a variety of contexts and engages students in language creation rather than duplication.

Second, a task can never replace human interaction where competent members of a culture assist the learning of novices. This fundamental dynamic of human learning and development in sociocultural contexts must not be forgotten. In a task-based approach, the teacher and other students in the class are important in providing assistance to carry out tasks. It is through collaboration with others that individuals come to regulate their own activity and become self-directed. Tasks are inert objects that frame activity. As such, they offer little assistance beyond perhaps a few language models, word banks, and directions. When a learner carries out a task, it requires the support of others beyond the static task description of the course manual. TBI requires,

therefore, a new approach to teaching. This new approach defines instruction as a form of dynamic assistance provided during task completion. In TBI, teaching can no longer be viewed as a one-directional transmission of information from teacher to students. Teachers will need to develop, therefore, new ways to assist learners, to differentiate the help that they offer, and to explore new resources to help learners as they participate in tasks. Teachers will also have to realize that tasks are tools that mediate the learners' interaction with each other and with the goals of their own learning, which may not be the goal of the task. In this way, teaching a task-based curriculum requires observing and analyzing how these tools are consequential to learning, how they enable or obstruct active collaboration, and how they create opportunities for the learners' goals to emerge.