

〈Paper〉

〈論文〉

A Rationale for Task-Based Learning

「作業主体」学習の理論的根拠

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Abstract

Research into second language acquisition (SLA) strongly indicates that there is no direct relationship between what is taught and what is learned. Language acquisition and mastery of grammatical forms does not necessarily develop in a predictable sequence that can be consciously controlled. Language acquisition is dependent on unknown natural processes. Learners acquire language in their own time when they are developmentally ready. The teacher, the lesson, or the learner cannot dictate when acquisition will occur.

A task-based learning (TBL) approach attempts to work with the learner's natural developmental processes. It aims to help learners to think about meaning first and to use language as a means to reaching a non-linguistic outcome similar to that of a real-life situation. The need to express meaning is believed to stimulate interlanguage development. After learners have experienced the language in an attempt to complete a task their attention should be directed toward formal properties of the language within that experience. Neglecting to give attention to language form can lead to a reliance on inappropriate use of the language and communicative strategies, which may result in premature fossilization.

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Introduction

Language acquisition is a complex process involving many unknown natural processes. Traditional classroom methodologies which follow a presentation, practice, and production (PPP) framework imply that learner intake directly corresponds with teacher input — that learning can be predicted and controlled by the teacher, the syllabus, and the lesson. However, PPP has not been shown to move learners toward language acquisition in the way it was designed to do. Recent developments in second language acquisition (SLA) research suggest overwhelmingly that language acquisition is not a result of teacher-led practice and production. Learners will acquire language in their own time, and in a developmental sequence that cannot be predicted or accounted for by the teacher or syllabus. Acquisition of language items does not occur in a predictable order, but is dependent on unconscious processes unique to the individual. The learner must be developmentally ready to master a certain language feature before acquisition can occur.

Task-based learning (TBL) theory is rooted in the most recent SLA research findings. It is an attempt to work with the learner's natural developmental processes. TBL theory acknowledges that acquisition is not an immediate or direct result of teacher input and that learning cannot be consciously controlled. It rests on the belief that acquisition begins with language use and that the learner's experience of the language should begin with the expression of meaning. Presenting learners with tasks to complete, which are similar to real-life situations, is believed to create a need to communicate meaning and require the learner to confront the language in an effort to solve a problem, achieve a goal, or fill a gap- to reach a non-linguistic outcome. The task alone "will create a need for language change and a means of fulfilling that need" (Skehan 1998:124). The learner's attempt to communicate using his/her present language resources is believed to drive forward interlanguage development.

Genuine communicative tasks may successfully lead learners to a functional or communicative competence in the language, but may not provide the conditions needed for learners to reach a high level of language accuracy. It is important that learners give balanced

attention to both form and meaning. Skehan states, “language use, in itself, does not lead to the development of an analytic knowledge system since meaning distracts attention from form” (Skehan 1998:27). Learner awareness should consistently be directed toward language form in general. There is increasing evidence indicating that a failure to direct learners’ attention to the formal properties of language increases the likelihood of pre-mature fossilization. Yes, some learners may attain a high level of grammatical accuracy and appropriacy without formal instruction. However, drawing learners’ attention to language form is likely to speed up the acquisition processes as well as allow learners to reach a higher level of ultimate attainment.

Defining second language acquisition (SLA)

The nature of communicative language teaching seems to assume that acquisition of the target language (TL) is the ultimate goal of learners. However, many learners in communicative English courses are in fact not in pursuit of acquisition in its complete sense. Rather they are undergoing the course in order to get a basic understanding of some English expressions, or to fulfill an academic requirement of the institution. Thus, there are several ways to define SLA as “different researchers have given very different interpretations of it” (Ellis 1994:11). I will not go into detailing the different interpretations of SLA, but because the term will be referred to repeatedly, it seems appropriate to provide a working definition.

The term SLA will refer to the acquisition of both formal and communicative competence in the TL. Communicative competence may be defined as “an assertion that learners not only need to know the grammar and vocabulary of a TL; they must also acquire the skills necessary to use the language in communication” (Willis 1997:8). SLA also concerns language that is appropriate to the communicative objectives of a situation, in a given language community (Willis 1997). SLA, in other words, is a combination of linguistic and pragmatic knowledge of the language (Ellis 1994).

TBL: challenging traditional approaches

A TBL approach can be contrasted with the popular practice-based model known as presentation, practice, production (PPP). PPP is considered the traditional approach to

language teaching (Skehan 1996) and the profession has been reluctant to change the dominance of this tradition in spite of recent criticism based on SLA research. PPP is the fundamental and often the only method used in ELT teacher training courses (Willis, D. & J. Willis 1996a). The reasons are simple: PPP is a convenient and logical format by which to teach. It appears to follow a logical sequence of activities leading to acquisition implying the “accumulated entities” view of acquisition (see Rutherford 1987) : that language can be learned one item at a time leading to mastery. And finally, *learners* have tendency to believe that language can be learned one item at a time leading them to acquisition.

PPP does not take into account the complex nature of communication. It sets a premium on automatic response rather than on creative thought and does not encourage learners to think for themselves about the target language (TL). PPP makes little demands on learners concerning the problem-solving nature of communication. It encourages automatic response rather than free choice, the latter of which is the essence of real communication.

Concerning the apparent popularity as well as the deception of PPP Lewis (1996:13) states:

One of the main attractions of PPP is that it allows teacher training courses to introduce trainees to the idea of a neat lesson plan, with neat and distinct phases to the lesson....Teacher training has over-valued PPP precisely because it allows teaching to focus on discrete, and apparently manageable, language items ; the teacher has control over what is being ‘taught’. But this control is illusory. All forms of procedural or skill-based learning are, in fact, not subject to the kind of linear sequencing intrinsic to any assertion that we know exactly what is being learned at any given moment.

Next, we will weigh a TBL approach to language acquisition against the most recent findings in SLA research.

Task-based learning theory

Task-based learning theory is an attempt to create the conditions for language acquisition based on the most recent SLA research findings. A TBL approach “sees the learning process as one of learning through doing — it is by primarily engaging in meaning that the learner’s

system is encouraged to develop (Skehan 1996:20). It aims to work with the unconscious processes that allow acquisition to occur. It is believed that when the learner uses language to express real meanings to achieve real a real purpose, this drives interlanguage development. It is the expression of meaning and the attempt to get something done with the language that leads the way to communicative competence. TBL is an attempt to complement internal acquisition processes, to work with and encourage learners' natural development.

What is a task?

A task is realized by a problem to solve, a game to win, a gap to bridge, or some kind of goal to achieve. It involves reaching a non-linguistic outcome, and necessitates functions similar to that of a real-life situation. A task according to Willis, J. (1996:53) is:

...a goal-oriented activity in which learners use language to achieve a real outcome. In other words, learners use whatever target language resources they have in order to solve a problem, do a puzzle, play a game, or share and compare experiences.

The purpose or goal of the task may not be real-life, as such, but it is real in the sense that learners are required to mean what they say in their effort to reach the desired outcome. Thus, it is not unlike a real-life situation. Long and Crookes (1993 in Skehan 1996:20) emphasize this point:

Tasks... are activities, which have meaning as their primary focus. Success in the task is evaluated in terms of achievement of an outcome, and tasks generally bear some resemblance to real-life language use.

Next we will discuss the practical aspects of TBL and how it takes shape in terms of a pedagogical framework.

A pedagogical framework

A basic visual model of a TBL lesson has been provided by Willis, J. (1996:53). The lesson is divided into three main stages: pre-task, task cycle, and language focus.

PRE-TASK

Introduction to topic and task



TASK CYCLE

Task → Planning → Report



LANGUAGE

Analysis and practice

Pre-task

The pre-task stage serves as a time of language support in preparation for the main lexical items associated with the task topic and to stimulate real-world schema. This exposure introduces the theme of the lesson and provides some background knowledge before taking on the main task.

The pre-task gives learners a hint of what is to be expected of them in the task cycle. By highlighting useful vocabulary and phrases in the pre-task phase learners will be better prepared for the main task (Willis, J. 1996). When they have an idea of what to expect they can spend more cognitive energy on creativity in task completion than on figuring out what the task is about and how to complete it (Skehan 1996). Pre-task listening, for example, eases the cognitive complexity of the task by exposing learners to native speakers engaged in a similar communicative task. Willis 1990:63 claims:

If learners are to gain experience of language in use it is not enough for them simply to work with tasks for themselves. Ideally they must also be given exposure to language relevant to the task they have performed or are about to perform, and in particular they must be given the opportunity to see how competent speakers and writers use the language to achieve similar outcomes.

Native speaker input can give learners a goal to aim for and an idea of how to approach the task, but still leave learners the freedom to be creative and original.

Task

The task stage involves learners in working to reach some kind of non-linguistic outcome that is similar to a real-life situation. The teacher circulates and is available to help learners formulate what they want to say but not interrupt for grammatical correction or formal teaching.

At this point the primary objective is for learners to complete the task. The intention is for learners to be confronted with the language and to stretch their present interlanguage capacity in an effort to communicate meaning in order to reach the desired outcome. The teacher may choose, during this time, to take note of difficulties learners may be experiencing in order to draw their attention to these features during the language-focus stage.

After students have completed (or at least attempted to complete) the task they will begin refining the language they have used for accuracy in the planning stage.

Planning

In the planning stage of the task cycle learners prepare to present their completed task to the class. The objective is for learners' attention to be directed toward language accuracy.

Knowing that they will be required to go before peers may motivate learners to present the language as clearly and accurately as possible. Crookes (1989 in Skehan 1996:25) reported that "planning time was associated with greater complexity of syntax and a wider variety of lexis." Planning also may be associated with more ambitious language and more risk-taking.

The planning phase may draw learners' attention to features of the language that characterize the meanings they wish to convey. This does not make the learner ready in terms of acquisitional readiness. Rather, it may make learners more consciously inclined to notice features that might be useful in communicating what they want to say accurately and

appropriately. As they approach the language-focus stage of the unit they may be better suited to understand and receive the target form and, as a result, more efficiently restructure their grammar system.

Report

During the report stage learners present to the class their solution of the task reporting the information that they have polished for accuracy during the planning stage. Reporting is a way 'to sensitize the learner to the language which needs to be used...an alerting function which is close to Swain's (1995) 'notice the gap' principle" (Skehan 1998:128).

It is believed that learners who are required to speak before their peers are more motivated to accurately- that is they want to look decent in front of their classmates, and the teacher who may be evaluating their report (Willis, J. 1996).

As individuals or groups report their task findings, it is worthwhile to give the listening audience a task- a purpose for listening (Willis, J. 1996). A listening task for classmates is also likely to motivate the presenter to speak more clearly knowing that her information is the subject of her classmates' task. The learners may be divided into groups and each group given certain isolated items to listen for. This allows learners to focus on the key information.

Language focus

Time for a focus on form is taken at the end of the lesson/unit after a meaningful context has been established and the teacher has observed learner mistakes and difficulties. The process of the task helps to create a felt need to communicate efficiently and as grammatically correct as possible. As Willis (1990:65) states: learners

are already looking for the language to express these notions, they know that they need the language, and they are likely to accept it readily when it is offered. The paramount function of the task, then is to provide a context and need for language target forms.

This stage is an appropriate time to give learners a written transcript of a task done by native speakers to be exploited in consciousness-raising activities.

The language-focus time is not an attempt to teach the grammatical system directly for mastery. Its purpose is to encourage learners to notice certain characteristics, and to look out for them later. Teachers cannot determine what will be acquired, but we can have a fairly direct effect on what learners will notice. We are making the learner aware of certain items with the hope that as they encounter them again they can identify them and restructure their language system accordingly.

A place for practice

As you can see the PPP and TBL paradigms are very different from the theoretic foundations on which they lie to the practical structure they embody in the classroom. Does practice have a place in a TBL frame work ? Actually, there is a place for practice activities that are often associated with PPP, but the objective is different. Meaningful practice is a useful activity when we reject the idea that it teaches grammar. It can however,

1. Enhance the learner's familiarity and fluency with holophrastic units whose meaning and grammar have already been highlighted and exemplified in use.
2. Build on the learner's familiarity [with patterns found in naturally occurring language] to promote fluent production.
3. Consolidate such units so that they are easily retrievable. It is an attempt to consolidate the familiar rather than to present the unfamiliar.
4. Be a useful confidence builder.

(adapted from Willis 1990:72,73)

Practice can have a useful purpose after the language has been processed for meaning. When taken out of a behaviorist view of learning and used with language that has been processed for meaning, practice can help learners with pronunciation and intonation and build confidence in speaking.

Conclusion

A task-based learning model provides an alternative approach to the traditional presentation, practice, production paradigm. TBL is an attempt to apply the most recent findings in second-language acquisition research to a pedagogical model. TBL theory is based on the belief that language acquisition is a complex process unique to each individual and is dependent on many developmental factors. TBL theory rejects the idea that language acquisition is a process of accumulated entities: that grammatical features can be mastered bit by bit in a linear fashion. Rather, learners acquire language skills in their own time and when they are developmentally ready. A TBL approach promotes the idea that learners' interlanguage system is extended when they endeavor to express meaning first in order to reach a goal or complete a task. The outcome of the task is measured in terms of a non-linguistic outcome similar to real-life situation rather than grammatically correct production. In a TBL framework a focus on form and language accuracy comes after language has been processed for meaning. After learners have attempted to use the language for communication it is believed that they are better suited to notice formal properties and, when developmentally ready, re-structure their language system accordingly.

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