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LA/ Master 2

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Lecture 13: Sociocultural Theory of SLA: Tasks

Cultural Differences in Language Use

According to Gumperz (1982) and others (Bialystok & Hakuta, 1994; Tannen, 1984), there are numerous cultural differences in discourse style. Just as Gumperz' (1982) 'discourse strategies' are crossculturally variable and a potential source of intercultural communication, appropriate CS use may also be culturally constrained. Therefore, along with Dörnyei (1995), Faucette (2001) argued that communication strategy training could be used to highlight cross-cultural differences in terms of appropriateness of CS use. For example, in the Rost & Ross' (1991) study of listening strategy instruction, cultural preferences were noted, such as their claim that "questions are often viewed negatively in Japanese educational settings as admissions of ignorance or inattention" (p. 255). In addition to the threat of the student's own face, questions in class could also be seen as disrespectful to 'sensei' and hence a threat to a higher-status person's face (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1967). Tarone (1980) argued that although SC must exist in all languages and cultures, "the particular types of strategy preferred for use in such situations may be culture-specific or language-specific" (p. 422).

Cultural differences in the use of silence, which might indicate message abondonment, is one such CS-related speech component that comes to mind (Gilmore, 1985; Hall, 1959; Tannen & Saville-troike, 1985). Dörnyei (1995) also mentioned differences in verbalizing certain strategies. For example, the Japanese 'eh?' meaning 'huh?' which could be used as a global appeal for assistance, might be seen as impolite in some cultures. Effective training in culturally appropriate CS use would be beneficial to students from all languages and cultures (Faucette, 2001).

Task Definition

Task has figured to as an important construct in SLA research, serving both as a device for instructional treatment in experimental studies and for measuring the outcomes of this treatment (Ellis, 2008). For Bygate et al., (2001), a task is defined as "a contextualised, standardised activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, and with a connection to the real world, to attain an objective, and which will elicit data which can be used for purposes of measurement" (p. 12). And Bialystok (1990) stated that a task is one type of elicitation methods which is important in determining the strategies that will be observed. Further, Bialystok and Swain (1978) argued that research that is conducted in entirely natural conditions is more challenging to investigate and the findings are often hard to interpret. While "controlled laboratory study assumes the researcher that the phenomenon under investigation will be addressed and the superfluous variance owing to extraneous contextual factors will be minimized, or at least capable of being documented and controlled" (Bialystok, 1990, p. 61). However, Poulisse (1990) argued that "finding a task which was in between controlled and natural tasks was not easy" (p. 83). For Bialystok (1990), various elicitation methods have been used by previous research on CSs and "these methodological differences may influence a language learner's selection of a specific communication strategy" (p. 50).

Focused Tasks' vs. Unfocused Tasks

For Ellis (2008, p. 819), focused tasks aim to "induce learners to process, receptively and productively, some particular linguistic feature(s)" but unfocused tasks "may dispose learners to choose from a range of forms but they are not designed with the use of a specific form in mind". And the relationship between task features and language use comes in three main types according to descriptive research: "(1) tasks and the negotiation of meaning, (2) tasks and learner production, and (3) the co-construction of tasks through interaction" (ibid). When we come to discuss the link between tasks and negotiation of meaning, we have to consider Long's 'Interaction Hypothesis' (1983b, 1996). The underlying assumption of research from this perspective is that it has to be viable to construct a multidimensional framework, orchestrating tasks in terms of their promise for second/ FL language learning on the basis of psycholinguistically originated

connotations. First of all, Pica & Doughty (1985 a,b) found that small-group work in language classrooms only resulted in more negotiation work than teacher-fronted lessons when the task was of the required information type. Newton (1995) found almost double the quantity of negotiation in tasks where the information was shared. And Foster (1998) reported that required information exchange tasks consistently elicited more negotiation and more modified output. In addition, Nakahama, Tyler & van Lier (2001) came to conclude that conversational activity offered "a larger range of opportunities for language use" (p. 401). Comparing NNs-NNs interactions, Gass & Varonis (1985) found that more indicators of non-understanding occurred in the one-way task.

Sociocultural Theory and Tasks

And about tasks and L2 production, Ellis (2008), among other studies (Foster & Skehan, 1996; Skehan & Foster, 1997, 1999), postulated how tasks and the way they are performed influence the fluency, complexity, and accuracy of learners' L2 production. And these studies investigated a number of variables as 'familiarity of information', the 'degree of structure' and the 'complexity of outcome'. They also investigated implementational variables such as pre- and within-task planning and task rehearsal (Ellis, 2008). Whereas interactionist and cognitive theories view tasks as devices that predispose learners to engage in interactions which are, therefore, to some extent predictable on the basis of the design features of the tasks and the methodological procedures for implementing them, 'sociocultural theory' emphasizes that the activity that derives from a task is unstable, varying in accordance with the specific goals and motives of the participants (ibid). In different words, from a sociocultural perspective, there is no straightforward relationship between task-as-workplan and task-in-process. Such an approach acknowledges that the interaction that results from a task is "dynamic, fluid, and locally managed on a turn-by-turn basis to a considerable extent" (Seedhouse, 2005, p. 556). The view of 'learning' that underlies this perspective is that of a competence that is co-constructed and embedded in interaction (Ellis, 2008).

Further, Mori (2002) stated that pre-task planning inhibited learners from attention to moment-by-moment development of the talk. In other words, pre-task planning had a nugatory rather than beneficial effect on the way the task was performed as it denied

learners the opportunity to engage in authentic conversation (Ellis, 2008). Platt and Brooks (2002) investigated 'task engagement' (i.e., the attainment of intersubjectivity and control of a task) from a sociocultural perspective. The researchers concluded that performing a task is a 'struggle' that can only be successfully managed when learners achieve control over the task. In sum, task performances are always constructed rather than determined by task design features and methodological procedures, and it is also the case that the task-as-workplan will predispose learners to behave in certain ways (Ellis, 2008). The relationship between tasks and interaction can benefit from both an etic and an emic approach, which should be then seen as complementary rather than oppositional (ibid). And this complementary view was adapted in the present research. Thus, in the current investigation, two main definitions of CSs were adhered. The first in which CSs are conceived as devices used by speakers to improve the level of communication; as they form an important part of a speaker's linguistic ability as it was shown in Swain's Model of CC. According to Swain (1984), strategic competence involves the "mastery of CSs that may be called into action either to enhance the effectiveness of communication or to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to limiting factors in actual communication or to insufficient competence in one or more of the other components of communicative competence" (p. 189). And the second definition is that of Tarone (1981) which focuses less on a speaker's inability to convey meaning while emphasizing that both speaker and hearer contribute to comprehension. She provided a broad explanation that characterizes a CS as "mutual attempt of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared" (p. 288).

Tasks and Language Teaching

Tasks, in language teaching, are seen as important vehicles providing learners with the means to develop communicative competence by experiencing language as it is used outside the class (Slimani-Rolls, 2005). Tasks appear to be an ideal construct to link the fields of SLA and language pedagogy (Pica, 1997; Ellis, 2003). There is a general consensus among researchers such as Long (1988, 1989); Varonis & Gass (1985), Doughty & Pica (1986); Pica (1987), Pica et al., (1993) that the use of two-way

information tasks in group work and pair work, involving learners in sharing essential information initially distributed only partially to each member (Slimani-Rolls, 2005), provides favourable settings for learners to negotiate meaning, via the conversational adjustments they make in interaction. This consensus in favour of two-way tasks for language classrooms is challenged by other studies (Duff, 1986; Nakahama et al., 2001), suggesting that the two-way task cannot pretend any general supremacy over the one-way task. Varonis & Gass (1985) and Bejarano et al., (1997) found that it was, in fact, the one-way task that generated more meaning negotiation. Thus, if the aim of negotiation studies is to isolate the most effective task type to impact on language acquisition in the classroom, "they have done little but suggest that a commonsense use of a balanced diet of one-way and two-way tasks is currently the safest way for teachers" (Slimani-Rolls, 2005, p. 196). Thus, in the present study, three main tasks were selected that range between one-way information exchange task and two-way information exchange task.

Demands for successfully accomplishing these tasks can be classified within four categories: engagement, risk-taking, knowledge and control (Vann & Abraham, 1990). All tasks in this study required 'engagement', a factor identified by Jakobovits (1970) as critical to language learning. Here engagement meant spending sufficient time on the assignment, clarifying and verifying the task demands where necessary, and providing evidence of attentiveness (Vann & Abraham, 1990). All learners in both groups were engaged in all tasks they performed in the two phases (pre- and post) of the work. The tasks also required what Beebe (1983) called 'risk-taking'. One can argue that all second/ foreign language learning requires learners to take risks (Vann & Abraham, 1990). Learners in this study took substantial risks as they struggled to find measures/ techniques/ words to bridge between their linguistic deficiencies and their communicative goal(s). Different types of knowledge are asked into play here. Declarative and procedural knowledge take the prime position. The relationship between these two is seen as a continuum rather than a dichotomy, with declarative knowledge (knowing WHAT) evolving into procedural knowledge (knowing HOW) through practice (Ellis, 2008). Also, background (or schemata) knowledge is to enable learners

to fit the new information presented in the task into their already established framework of knowledge (Vann & Abraham, 1990). Moreover, the tasks demanded varying levels of cognitive 'control', processes that manage selection and coordination of knowledge (Vann & Abraham, 1990). As Bialystok & Ryan (1985) noted, control in coordinating information becomes increasingly important where monitoring procedures are needed to oversee several aspects of a problem, for example, form and meaning, or meaning and context. Further, following the work of Vann & Abraham (1990), the tasks of this investigation were arranged so that they progressed from least to most demanding along the dimensions of engagement, risk taking, knowledge, and control. However, it should be noted that these factors sometimes intersect; for example, insufficient knowledge for a task may cause a learner not to engage.

In addition, this study gave the learners the opportunity of using two different kinds of task planning: pre-task planning and planning as rehearsal. Though the results of many studies are contradictory but after visiting a number of such researches, Ellis (2008) came to conclude that when learners plan strategically they give more attention to drawing up a conceptual plan of what they want to say rather than to formulating detailed linguistic plans. Even when asked to engage in form-focused planning they may not do so, preferring to use the time given to them to sequence ideas and to work out the semantic linkages among propositions. Alternatively, it is possible that even when learners do attend to form when planning, "they find it difficult to carry over the forms they have planned into performance of the task" (p.498). Ellis (2008) continued to claim that when learners plan they have to choose what aspect of production to focus on; focusing on fluency and complexity is at the expense of accuracy and vice-versa. And this is exactly what happened to the learners of the present study in both groups and phases. The second type of planning that was given to learners was 'planning as rehearsal'. About its advantages, Bygate (1996) found that rehearsal enhanced complexity, with the learner using more lexical verbs, more regular past tense forms, a wide range of vocabulary and cohesive devices, and fewer inappropriate collocations on the second occasion. Also, Bygate & Samuda (2005) suggested that repeating a task serves as a kind of 'integrative planning' which can lead to qualitative improvements.

And about rehearsing the same type of task, Bygate (2001) involved her learners in narrative and interview tasks and sought to investigate the effects practising these tasks on both a second performance of the same task and on performance of the same task of the same type. She showed that the second performance manifested greater fluency and complexity and also that the opportunity to practise that particular type of task helped. However, the practice did not appear to assist performance of a new task of the same type. In other words, there was no transfer of practice effect (Ellis, 2008). And this is what was concluded by Ellis (2008, p. 495) saying that the, "research on rehearsal suggests that it has a beneficial effect on learners' subsequent performance of the same task but that there is no transferance of the rehearsal effect to a different task". And this is exacly, disappointingly, what happened in the present study and even more unexpected results, as performing better in the first performance rather than the second.

One-way Information Exchange Task

For Slimani-Rolls (2005, p. 199), one way tasks "are tasks not requiring information exchange and are therefore referred to as 'optional exchange' tasks". In other words, while the speakers provided information, their classmates were not requested to supply any.

Two-way Information Exchange Task

In these tasks, "each person holds information the other must acquire to be able to carry out the task successfully" (Slimani-Rolls, 2005, p. 199-200). Two-way information-gap tasks provide optimal conditions for active participation by all students and thereby generate conversational modification (Bejarano et al., 1997). According to Long (1981), this is crucial for promoting language acquisition.

When Doughty & Pica (1986) compared two-way information learning tasks and one-way tasks, they found that one-way tasks are the ones prevalently used in language classrooms as they are usually more readily available to language teachers. It would, therefore, be necessary to ensure that learners develop effective interaction strategies which will enable them to participate interactively in one-way tasks as well as in two-way tasks. In this way, the commonly used one-way tasks can also become fully

interactive activities in which conversational modification can be generated (Bejarano et al., 1997; Duff, 1986; Nakahama et al., 2001). The same idea was shared by Slimani-Rolls (2005) who revealed that one-way tasks offer more scope for "meaningful negotiation and prompt learners to produce more complex input modification" (p. 204). And in any task chosen, even though roles and desired ends had been fixed by the task, the "ensuring interaction would be real" (Kasper & Dahl, 1991, p. 228). Furthermore, it is assumed that in order to encourage effective interaction, in both two-way and one-way tasks, students need to learn (a) how to negotiate for meaning and (b) how to engage in cohesive and coherent sequences of interaction. In other terms, this combination of tasks in which various degrees of control were established ranging from strictly controlling to resembling natural conversation was fairly balanced.