

LEARNER PERCEPTION OF LEARNING TASKS

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ABSTRACT

In the context of task-based language teaching, a challenge facing the language teaching profession is to determine how learners perceive and treat the formal and functional properties of language learning tasks. The preliminary study reported here presents the interplay between teacher objectives, task input, peer interaction and learner perception of transactional tasks. The study shows that the formal, functional and interactional dimensions of a task seem to operate in tandem when learners perform a task in order to get business done in the classroom and, by extension, in the outside world. The study also suggests that the boundaries of the three dimensions are blurred in the learners' mind, and that the degree of attention to the three dimensions is determined largely by learners themselves. This finding has implications for the study for task development, task complexity and also for larger issues of syllabus and methodology.

Introduction

In the context of task-based language teaching (TBLT), if the 1980's is considered a period of tentative exploration, the 90's and beyond can be considered a period of impressive expansion. Within a short time, several research-based books on task-based language learning and teaching have appeared (e.g. Bygate, Skehan & Swain, eds. 2001; Crookes & Gass, eds. 1993a, b; Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Skehan, 1998). In addition, there are specifically targeted textbooks that provide tasks for language learning (Gardner & Miller, 1996; Willis, 1996), tasks for language teaching (Johnson, 2003; Parrott, 1993), tasks for teacher education (Tanner & Green, 1998), tasks for classroom observation (Wajnryb, 1992), and tasks for language awareness (Thornbury, 1997). In addition, numerous textbooks that claim to follow task-based approaches for teaching various skills at various levels of proficiency are available.

As I pointed out in a recent review (Kumaravadivelu, 2006a), in spite of the increasing number of publications, a consensus definition of 'task' continues to elude the profession. One finds in the relevant literature various definitions highlighting various aspects of TBLT (for a compilation of definitions, see Johnson, 2003; Kumaravadivelu, 1993). Synthesizing various strands of thought, Ellis (2003: 16) provides a composite definition:

"A task is a workplan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed. To this end, it requires them to give primary attention to meaning and to make use of their own linguistic resources, although the design of the task may predispose them to choose particular forms. A task is intended to result in language use that bears a resemblance, direct or indirect, to the way language is used in the real world. Like other language activities, a task can engage productive or receptive, and oral or written skills, and also various cognitive processes."

An interesting aspect of this definition is that it includes almost all the major points of contention in language pedagogy: attention to meaning, engagement with grammar, inclusion of pragmatic properties, use of authentic communication, importance of social interaction, integration of language skills, and the connection to psycholinguistic processes.

With regard to recommendations for curriculum design and classroom practices, one comes across a menu of options ranging from an explicit focus on form to an exclusive focus on function. Referring to two extremes of task orientation (structure-oriented tasks and communicatively-oriented tasks), Skehan (1998: 121) rightly observes that:

"they concentrate on one aspect of language performance at the expense of others. The structure-oriented approach emphasizes form to the detriment of meaning, while an extreme task-based approach focuses very much on meaning and not on form".

Skehan stresses the need for a third approach in which “the central feature is a balance between form and meaning, and an alternation of attention between them” (p.121). Long (1991; 2005; Long & Robinson, 1998) has consistently argued for a particular type of focus on form in which learners’ attention is drawn to linguistic features if and when demanded by the communicative activities and the negotiation of meaning learners are engaged in.

In spite of the impressive strides in TBLT research, several crucial questions still remain to be satisfactorily resolved. They include:

1. how individual learners divide their attentional resources in order to cope with cognitive, linguistic, and communicative demands of the task?
2. what kind of tasks will cause learners notice the gap in their interlanguage development?
3. how to design tasks that will ensure sufficient focus on form without at the same time jeopardizing their communicative character?
4. how to select and sequence tasks in order to design a coherent task-based curriculum?
5. what kind of assessment techniques are best suited to monitor learner progress towards their interlanguage development (see Ellis, 2003 for a comprehensive review of some of these research issues).

It seems to me that the most stubborn of the questions relates to the relationship between form and meaning, and its attendant issue of how the learner’s attentional resources are allocated. Calling the allocation of attention “the pivotal point” in second language learning and teaching, Schmidt (2001: 11) has argued that it “largely *determines* the course of language development” (*italics added*). The crux of the problem facing TBLT is how to make sure that learners focus their attention on grammatical forms while attempting to express their intended meaning. A crucial methodological choice to be made:

“is whether to take a proactive or reactive stance to focus on form. That is to say, a proactive approach would entail selecting *in advance* an aspect of the target to focus on, whereas a reactive stance would require that the teacher notice and be prepared to handle various learning difficulties as they arise” (Doughty & Williams, 1998, p. 198, *italics as in original*).

At present however, according to Doughty and Williams, “there is no definitive research upon which to base a choice of one over the other, rather, it seems likely that both approaches are effective, depending upon the classroom circumstances” (p. 211).

The search for robust and reliable answers to the question of attentional resources depends to a large extent on the analysis, description and evaluation of what learners actually do when they perform pedagogic tasks in the classroom. A general concern that has been raised about

most of the studies conducted so far is that conceptualization of learner performance of tasks has been mostly experimental (Foster, 1998; Swain, 1995, 1998). In other words, even the limited knowledge we have of task performance has come more from studies conducted under experimental conditions than from studies conducted in actual classroom settings. One way of identifying and understanding the internal and external factors involved in task performance is to study the dialogues that learners engage in with other learners and with their teachers. As Swain (1995: 142) rightly points out,

“if one accepts a Vygotskian perspective that much learning is an activity that occurs in and through dialogues, that development occurs first on the inter-psychological plane through socially constructing knowledge and processes, then it must be that a close examination of dialogue as learners engage in problem-solving activity is directly revealing of mental processes. The unit of analysis of language learning and its associated processes may therefore more profitably be the dialogue, not input or output alone.”

For the purpose of analyzing and understanding task performance, the dialogue that learners engage in may be classified into two broad categories: talk and metatalk. Talk refers to the content of conversation that learners have with other learners and/or with their teachers *during* the performance of a pedagogic task in the classroom setting. The emphasis here is on the interactive process that goes with the successful completion of a given task. Talk then may be initiated by the learners themselves, or prompted by the teacher or demanded by the task itself. Metatalk, on the other hand, refers to the content of conversation that learners have with other learners and/or with their teachers *after* their task performance, and about their task performance itself. The emphasis here is on the reflective process that goes with the critical evaluation of task performance. Metatalk then may be initiated by the learners themselves or prompted by their teachers through post-task interviews or through a metatask (task about the task) designed for the specific purpose of generating metatalk. The term ‘metatalk’ has generally been used in the TBLT literature (see, for instance, Swain 1998) to refer to the learners’ use of language about language use during a problem-solving activity or task performance. But the operational definition of the term I have given here restricts its reference to post-task conversations about task performance. Metatalk thus requires a higher level of thinking and therefore a higher level of language use on the part of the learners.

The significance of talk and metatalk can hardly be ignored when one realizes that learning outcome in TBLT, as Breen (1987) argued nearly two decades ago, is the result of a fairly unpredictable interaction between the learner, the task and the task situation. Besides, research on teacher intention and learner interpretation of language learning tasks (Kumaravadivelu, 1991), and learner perceptions of teaching and learning activities (Barkhuizen, 1998) clearly demonstrates that neither the task designer nor the classroom teacher can ensure that learners take a particular path or use a particular strategy to transact a particular task. In such circumstances, it is the learners’ talk and metatalk that can potentially open a window into their internal, self-regulating processes that no intelligent conjecture on the part of the task designer

or the classroom teacher can do. Therefore, a comprehensive and critical analysis of talk and metatalk that take place in the actual classroom setting is essential to facilitate a deeper and richer understanding of the unpredictable relationship between the learner, the task and the task situation.

The study

Adhering to the rationale outlined above, I conducted an exploratory study aimed at taking an initial step towards understanding what the learners in the classroom actually do when presented with a problem-solving task. By analyzing learners' talk during task performance and their metatalk about their performance, I aimed to derive useful insights into some of the crucial issues mentioned earlier and also possible implications for task-based learning, teaching and research.

This descriptive study was made possible by teacher Abby (pseudonym) and her students. Abby, who holds an MA in TESOL, has been teaching English as a second language (ESL) for nearly four years at an English Language Center in San José, California. At the time of data collection, Abby was teaching an intermediate level ESL Grammar class with fifteen adult students: nine women and six men, out of whom ten spoke Spanish as their first language, and the rest spoke Vietnamese (2), Japanese (2) and Chinese (1). The class met two hours a day, five days a week. One of the textbooks Abby prescribed for the class was *Dimensions of Grammar: Form, Meaning and Use*, an intermediate level textbook written by Riggensbach and Samuda that seeks to follow the principles of TBLT. Thus, both the teacher and the students were familiar with some version of task-based instruction.

In order to ensure that the study was conducted in as 'natural' a classroom environment as possible, I followed certain procedures similar to those followed by Foster (1998). Like her, I was concerned about preserving the normality of the classroom to the extent possible. So, I advised Abby (1) to present the task as a routine class activity involving all the students present in class, (2) to act as teacher as well as researcher, thus avoiding the presence of a stranger in class, (3) to allow the class to divide into small groups the way they normally do in her class, (4) to do the video-recording in as non-intrusive and non-threatening way as possible, and (5) to conduct an open-ended (i.e. without any prefabricated questions) post-talk interview with at least one group of learners, and do that, if possible, as part of the class activity. While the first three requests were easy and straightforward, items 4 and 5 required some extra planning. For item 4, Abby decided to ask two self-constituted groups to volunteer to be videotaped at the same time as the class performed the task. For item 5, she decided to ask the two videotaped groups to act as two separate 'panels' discussing their task performance with her while the rest of the class listened to the 'panel discussion'. She thought this would be a normal activity since the students were used to conducting debates in her class. I agreed with her suggestions because I thought this was as 'normal' as one could get for research purposes.

A key means to signaling the evaluation in storytelling: the sentential representation of variable temporal passage

Abby and I decided on a decision-making task involving Christmas shopping. It was executed in Abby's regular classroom during Christmas season. The decision was made not merely because the task was seasonally appropriate, but it was similar to a task the class had done two weeks ago. Besides, Abby said she firmly believed in meaning-oriented tasks and did not want her students to preoccupy themselves with linguistic form. Research shows (see, for instance, Foster & Skehan, 1996) that decision-making tasks promote meaningful interaction where the learners' attention is focused on message construction. They place a considerable communicative and cognitive load upon the learners. In addition, the unpredictable nature of interaction makes the task relatively difficult by requiring consensus-making as well as negotiating skills.

On the day of instruction and data collection, the class was asked to divide into five groups of three each. They were asked to do the task in their respective groups. They were given five rules to abide by:

- (1) together, they can spend only a hundred dollars, including a sales tax of 8.25%;
- (2) they have to buy at least three gifts for someone of their choice;
- (3) they have to agree on the gift items;
- (4) they can choose the gifts only from a departmental store catalog supplied to them, and
- (5) they should not speak in their first language.

Although I disagreed on the last rule, Abby said it was her normal practice not to allow students to use their first language in class. The students were advised to select a group leader who was supposed to function as the facilitator of the conversation and take notes for class presentation. They were given a pocket calculator to help them compute the money, and they had unlimited time. Abby went over the rules until it was clear that all of them understood what they were supposed to do. After the task was done, she asked the two videotaped groups to take turns to discuss their task performance with her. During the 'panel discussion' the rest of the class played the role of the audience.

Before watching the videos, I decided to focus on the performance of one particular videotaped group for the purpose of transcription, analysis and interpretation. I selected that group because it consisted of three female Spanish speakers who, according to Abby, normally worked together as a group (the other videotaped group consisted of two Spanish speakers and a Japanese). The selected group suited my research purpose admirably well: three female Spanish speakers from intermediate level ESL class who have in the past demonstrated a tendency to work together as a team, now performing a task similar to the one they had done only two weeks ago. Thus, variables that have been found to influence task performance such as interlocutor familiarity, task familiarity, first language background and gender (see Plough & Gass, 1993; Gass and Varonis, 1986; Varonis & Gass, 1985), were automatically controlled. I transcribed, analyzed and interpreted learners' talk and metatalk (See Appendix for excerpts from talk and metatalk).

Analysis

Communicative tasks that pertain to problem-solving, decision-making or opinion expressing may also be called 'transactional tasks' in the sense that they promote the use of what has been called 'transactional language' (Brown & Yule, 1983; Yule, 1997). Transactional language is primarily message-oriented focusing on the exchange of information and content. It may also involve information exchange where two or more participants contribute messages to the transaction. An exploratory analysis of the nature of talk and metatalk engaged in by the learners participating in this study reveals that the transactional language they use has three distinct and yet interrelated dimensions: formal, functional and interactional. Briefly, the formal dimension focuses on the manipulation of syntactic and semantic features of the target language for the specific purpose of transacting the given task. The functional dimension focuses on various aspects of language use necessary to make and convey meaning. The interactional dimension focuses on interpersonal factors such as the maintenance of social relations, and the management of roles, relationships and responsibilities required to successfully transact the task. A few instances of talk and metatalk, taken from the transcriptions in the Appendix, suffice to illustrate the three dimensions of task performance.

The formal dimension

The learners in this study make explicit references to certain phonetic and lexical features. Right at the beginning (in turn # 5), s3 reminds her partners that Abby, their teacher, has explained that "at least three" means three or more. In turn # 22, s3 seeks and gets assistance to pronounce the word *beret*, something she correctly repeats later to her teacher (turn 142) and receives her appreciation (turn 145). In turns 62-66, all three learners are involved in teasing out the meaning for *muffler*. In turns 75-76, s1 and s2 struggle to come to grips with terms related to mathematical calculation. This is a problem they take up later with their teacher during the post-task session. Although the learners made no explicit references to grammatical structures during the performance of the task, it becomes clear in turns 147-152 that they did not fail to notice oft-repeated question forms such as *What do you think? Do you agree?* etc.

Perhaps the most unexpected episode that deals with the formal (more specifically, lexical) dimension of the task is the extended discourse on mathematical calculation. The participants struggle to come to grips with their lack of vocabulary pertaining to mathematical calculation and very clearly and repeatedly articulate their frustrations (turns 39-47, 75-76, and turns 95-109, 155-161). Neither the investigator, nor the classroom teacher anticipated the degree of frustration resulting from calculating the tax. Purely in terms of input/output generation, this struggle has contributed to greater language output by the learners than any other aspect of the task. If meaningful interaction is deemed to promote comprehension that leads to acquisition, then, here is a formal component of the task which has triggered a remarkable amount of meaningful interaction.

The functional dimension

The functional dimension of language use has been realized in speech acts such as making suggestions, seeking opinions, agreeing, disagreeing, and rejecting. For instance, in turns 14–15, s3 suggests that they can select their classmate Javier as the prospective recipient of their gifts because he is all the time asking for something. And s1 concurs. In turn 24, s1 uses an indirect speech act (*Does he use a hat?*) to reject a suggestion to buy a hat. Turns 17-21 provide examples of how members of the group solicit opinions from others. There are also several instances of agreement and disagreement. These speech acts are predominant in the student conversation partly because of the problem-solving, decision-oriented, opinion-seeking nature of the task itself.

The interactional dimension

In this dimension the participants establish the rules of the conversational game including gate-keeping. This is illustrated in the first 15 turns where they try to lay the ground rules for the transaction to take place. The student, s1, who acts as the facilitator, maintains order and continuity. As turns 8-9 reveal, s1 anticipates that S3 might be the one to speak in Spanish, and indicates her anticipation through non-verbal communication, by shaking her head as she looks at S3 while saying: “And Spanish must not be spoken.” As if to acknowledge, S3 laughs, nods and says “Okay.” In turn 51, the facilitator reminds her partners of an earlier understanding to buy clothes, and again in turn 72, she admonishes s3 when the latter did speak a word of Spanish. The facilitator again sums up the transactional activity hoping that the recipient of will enjoy the gifts.

Discussion

In this section, I will briefly discuss the salient features that emerge from the descriptive analysis of the learners’ talk and metatalk. I shall organize my comments in terms of some of the central issues that the professional community is presently preoccupied with, specifically, task dimension, attentional resources, notice the gap, and focus on form.

The multidimensionality of task performance

The first and foremost feature that stands out from the study is the multidimensionality of task performance. That there are formal, functional and interactional dimensions to a transactional task is not by itself a revelation. However, what clearly emerges from the learners’ talk and metatalk is the inherent interrelatedness of the three dimensions of task performance. Each of

these dimensions is capable of shaping and being shaped by the other two. In addition, each dimension operates in tandem with the others in order to perform a transactional task and to get business done in the classroom and, by extension, in the outside world. The three dimensions of a transactional task are so intertwined that their conceptual boundaries so assiduously constructed by the analyst and the teacher seem to be blurred in the minds of the learners. The learners move in and out of each of the dimensional zones with great ease as and when demanded by their own on-task processing and the on-going dialogue with their partners. This multidimensionality seems to be due more to the intrinsic nature of language as communication than to any skillful designing of the task itself. In fact, the transactional task given to the learners is conceptually very simple.

Attentional resources

That the learners in this study easily cross the borders between formal, functional and interactional dimensions of a transactional task without any explicit prompt from their teacher carries important implications for research into the allocation of attentional resources. Drawing insights from research in cognitive psychology and second language acquisition, scholars such as Skehan (1998) and Van Patten (1996) have vigorously argued that learners have only limited attentional capacity at their command during on-line processing, which significantly affects their attempt to map form-meaning relationships. Availability of attentional resources can easily limit the capacity of learners to simultaneously focus on more than one dimension of language use. Applying these insights to practical pedagogy, Skehan (1998) has suggested that the task designer and the classroom teacher manipulate learners' attentional availability before, during and after task performance. While correctly cautioning that "one cannot interfere with the way the task is being done without compromising the central quality of a communicative approach, primacy of meaning" (p. 147), Skehan has proposed several ways of designing communicatively oriented tasks that maximize the chances of a productive attentional balance in the task-based classroom.

There are others who point out that the single-source model is not the only model of attention that is available for consideration. Based on other psychological models that advocate multiple sources of attention, Long & Robinson (1998), for instance, hypothesize that form and meaning need not necessarily be in competition for attention. They argue that learners may be drawing on distinct pools of attentional resources relative to different aspects of task demands. They believe that "how focal attention is allocated is something that is negotiated by the teacher and students and not directly observable" (Long & Robinson, 1998: 23).

The analysis of talk and metatalk in the data presented here shows that allocation of attentional resources seems to be determined by learners themselves. It appears that teacher's instructional input or the nature of pedagogic tasks may not be the major factors that contribute to the allocation of attentional resources. Individual learners seem to have an equally powerful role

in determining where and when to direct their limited attentional resources. It could very well be that learners allocate their attentional resources to various aspects of a transactional task regardless of any attentional manipulation engineered by the task designer or the classroom teacher. A task with formal, functional and interactional dimensions may not trigger equal attention to these three dimensions. But it looks as if the difficulty level of the task, depending on whether the complexity is linguistic, cognitive or communicative, may give learners opportunities to direct their attentional resources to each of these dimensions as they deem fit. Clearly, the allocation of attentional resources will vary from learner to learner depending most probably on the extent to which each learner becomes aware of the need to pay attention to various aspects of language use. The last point takes us to yet another central issue mentioned earlier, namely, noticing the gap.

Noticing the gap

The 'notice the gap principle' in second language acquisition states that "a second language learner will begin to acquire the target-like form if and only if it is present in comprehended input and "noticed" in the normal sense of the word, that is consciously" (Schmidt and Frota, 1986: 311). In other words, learners have to notice the gap between their current interlanguage system and the target-like system they encounter in order to make progress. The basic tenet of this principle has found wide acceptance in the literature on second language acquisition (see, for instance, Doughty & Williams, 1998; Ellis, 2003; Gass, 1997; Skehan, 1998). It has been suggested that noticing performs "an interfacing function between the development of explicit knowledge of a feature through formal instruction and the eventual acquisition of that feature - the development of implicit knowledge" (Fotos, 1993: 387). It has been further suggested that "tasks in which a grammatical point is merely natural will not, by themselves, cause learners to 'notice the gap' and thus cause the internal linguistic system to be restricted" (Skehan, 1996: 37). The last two observations emphasize the role of explicit instruction in helping learners notice the gap.

The examples for the formal dimension of task performance in the talk and metatalk presented here indicate that at times learners do notice the gap even without explicit instruction and without external cues (cf. Swain, 1995; 1998). The transactional task given to the learners in this study lacked specificity in terms of linguistic focus, but still they did not fail to notice gaps in their linguistic knowledge without explicit attention drawn to them by the teacher or by the design of the task. It appears that while transactional tasks may not guarantee automatic sensitivity to form, they do not seem to preclude learners from focusing on form, or from noticing the gap in their interlanguage system if they choose to. Besides, this observation lends support to Swain's claim that learner output promotes noticing. According to her, "in producing the target language (vocally or subvocally) learners may notice a gap between what they *want* to say and what they *can* say, leading them to recognize what they do not know, or know only partially" (Swain 1995: 125-6, italics as in original).

Focus on form

Closely related to the principle of noticing the gap is the issue of focus on form which, one way or another, has been pivotal to language learning, teaching and research. Widespread dissatisfaction with pedagogies that emphasized explicit focus on forms led to experiential and meaning-focused pedagogies such as the process-oriented version of the communicative method (see Kumaravadivelu, 2006b for more details). However, extensive research in French immersion as well as content-based ESL classes conducted in Canada reveal that experiential and meaning-focused pedagogies help learners develop a fair degree of communicative fluency but not an acceptable level of grammatical accuracy (Harley 1992; Lightbown, 1998; Swain & Lapkin, 1986). The Canadian work put the limelight back on focus on forms with some claiming that a focus on forms is essential for interlanguage development, and others claiming that even if it is not essential, it can certainly accelerate the process of interlanguage development.

In the context of TBLT, Long (1991; Long & Robinson, 1998) has consistently argued for what he has called 'Focus on Form' in which learners' attention is drawn to linguistic features if and only if demanded by the communicative activities and the negotiation of meaning learners are engaged in. Focus on Form, according to Long & Robinson (1998: 23),

"refers to how focal attentional resources are allocated. Although there are degrees of attention, and although attention to forms and attention to meaning are not always mutually exclusive, during an otherwise meaning-focused classroom lesson, focus on form often consists of an occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features - by the teacher and/or one or more students - triggered by perceived problems with comprehension or production."

While occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features is precisely what the learners in the present study seemed to be doing, what is clear is that the dichotomy between focus on form and focus on meaning may prove to be a false one as far as the learners are concerned. The formal, functional and interactional dimensions of a transactional task are so intertwined that the learners do not seem to make any substantial distinction between them. Language learners have within their processing system a capacity to switch between the three dimensions of the task depending on whatever processing demands are most pressing. To assume otherwise, it seems to me, is to oversimplify the complexities of task performance and task processing.

Implications

Any attempt to derive generalizable implications is seriously handicapped because of the preliminary nature of this study, and also because of the limited amount of data collected and analyzed. Clearly, more studies are required before we can draw any actionable plans for curriculum design and instructional strategies. There are, however, certain indicators that we can

derive, indicators that shed light on some of the pedagogic issues associated with TBLT, and indicators that suggest possible directions for further exploration. I shall highlight some of them under two headings: implications for instruction, and implications for research.

Implications for instruction

A central issue in the implementation of task-based instruction is when and how to promote a principled focus on form. To a large extent, one's stand on this issue will shape the nature of task design, syllabus construction and instructional strategies. As mentioned above, a basic choice before us is whether to take a proactive or reactive stance to focus on form (Doughty & Williams, 1998). There are those who strongly advocate a proactive stance (e.g., Fotos & Ellis, 1991; Fotos, 1993; Loschky & Bley-Vroman, 1993), those who strongly advocate a reactive stance (e.g., Long & Robinson, 1998), and those who believe that "the jury is still out regarding which of these two stances is more appropriate" (e.g., Doughty & Williams, 1998:198) (for a detailed discussion on the merits and demerits of proactive and reactive stances, see Doughty & Williams (eds.), (1998), Ellis (2003), and Skehan (1998). Whichever stance one takes, one cannot escape the unmistakable signal from the learners of this and other related studies: it is they, not the task designer or the classroom teacher, who ultimately determine what dimension or combination of dimensions to explicitly focus on. Further complicating the scenario is the distinct possibility that decision-making about allocation of attentional resources will inevitably vary from individual to individual even among a group of learners who supposedly share the same level of proficiency in their still developing interlanguage.

A task-based pedagogy that is sensitive to learner control of focal attention has to provide adequate help for the classroom teacher to easily identify and to effectively address the specific areas of language that have not been adequately attended to by the learner. As I have argued elsewhere (Kumaravadivelu, 1993), the biggest methodological challenge facing the classroom teacher is to cope with the unpredictable nature of task performance. There is clearly an imperative need to sensitize prospective and practicing teachers to the potential mismatch between the *virtual* attentional control employed by the task designer and the *actual* attentional control exercised by the learner. In other words, the classroom teacher has to be equipped with the knowledge and skill necessary to make informed choices.

One of the ways in which the practicing teacher can be helped to make informed choices is through task analysis, that is, analysis of talk and metatalk. The most effective way to impart knowledge and skills necessary for the teacher to do task analysis is through pre-service and in-service teacher education programs. Regrettably, teacher education remains the weakest link in the implementation of TBLT. If it is true that the best pedagogic intervention is the one that comes after task performance, then, the practicing teacher has to be equipped with the observational and analytical tools necessary to understand what the learners actually do when they perform a transactional task. Only then, the teacher will be able to design appropriate post-

task activities that specifically address any performance-oriented difficulty faced by learners during task performance, and activities that encourage learners to critically and consciously reflect on their own task performance. For an example of an open-ended, discourse analytical tool that practicing teachers can use for monitoring their own teaching acts, see Kumaravadivelu (2003).

Implications for research

An important implication for further research that emerges from this study is that task-based research, to be of relevance, has to broad-base its scope of investigation. As mentioned earlier, most of the studies in TBLT have been conducted under controlled research conditions. They certainly have given us useful and usable insights but, by their very controlled nature, they can offer only a limited and limiting perspective on task performance and task processing. At this juncture in the exploration of task-based instruction, what we need more of are classroom-based projects that investigate what learners, in various learning/teaching contexts, actually do when they are asked to perform transactional tasks as part of their regular classroom activity. Unlike controlled experiments that may provide clear and clinical sets of data to analyze, classroom-based investigations may yield only a body of messy data that is cumbersome to deal with. But, such studies are absolutely needed if we are serious about moving from experimentation to the implementation of task-based instruction.

Yet another implication for research highlighted by this study is the need to collect, analyze and interpret classroom data that pertain to not merely how learners interact with each other in order to perform a task (i.e. talk) but also how they reflect on their task performance (i.e. metatalk). The use of learner talk for understanding language learning has long been recognized. Learners' metatalk, if properly understood, has the potential to contribute to learning, teaching and research agendas. From the learners' point of view, metatalk gives an opportunity for the learners to reflect on and articulate their mental operations to the extent possible, thereby helping them sensitize themselves to their own attempt to map form-meaning relationships. It also gives them an opportunity, if they so choose, to monitor their own interlanguage development and the progress they have been making. From the teacher's point of view, metatalk provides useful insights into task complexity, besides providing valuable feedback on the effectiveness of instructional strategies. From the researcher's point of view, metatalk can make available for analysis valuable data on task performance and task processing including noticing, attentional allocation, hypothesis formulation and testing. It is evident that only a comprehensive account and analysis of talk as well as metatalk will lead to a fuller and richer understanding of the internal and external factors that intervene between task design and task performance on the one hand, and between task performance and interlanguage development on the other.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have emphasized that the search for a principled and balanced approach to task-based learning and teaching depends to a large extent on the analysis, description, evaluation and understanding of learner talk during task performance and learner metatalk about their task performance. I have argued that learners' talk and metatalk carried out in the classroom context can potentially reveal their internal, self-regulating mechanisms that govern task performance and task processing.

The study shows that the formal, functional and interactional dimensions are so intertwined that their conceptual boundaries are blurred in the minds of the learners who are seen to move in and out of each dimensional zones with great ease as and when demanded by their on-line processing and their on-going dialogue with their partners. Furthermore, the allocation of attentional resources seems to be determined by learners themselves, thus suggesting that the teacher's instructional input or the nature of pedagogic tasks may play only a limited role in determining attentional resources. The learners have shown a tendency to notice the gap between their current interlanguage system and the target-like system without any explicit instruction or external cues. It appears that they have within their processing system a capacity to switch between different aspects of the task depending on whatever processing demands are most pressing.

Undoubtedly, large scale studies are required before any actionable plans can be formulated. Attempting to draw tentative implications from this preliminary study, I have pointed out that predetermination of attentional manipulation may have only a limited impact because it is the learners, not the task designer or the classroom teacher, who ultimately determine how to distribute their attentional resources. Therefore, any task-based pedagogy that is sensitive to learner control of focal attention has to equip the practicing teacher with the knowledge and skill necessary to identify the potential mismatch between the *virtual* attentional control employed by the task designer and the *actual* attentional control exercised by the learner. In this context, I have emphasized the importance of appropriate teacher education programs that prepare the practicing teacher to cope with the unpredictability of task performance and task processing.

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TALK AND METATALK (transcripts)

Excerpts from Talk

- 01 s1: Okay, who is gonna be the facilitator
- 02 s2 &3: You
- 03 s1: (laughs) Okay... We have Emporium catalog...We shop at Emporium...
okay? Oh...remember the rules? Did you copy the rules? What Abby
said...
(s2, s3 look through notebooks)
- 04 s1: We cannot spend more than 100 dollars... including tax .. 8.25% right?
(points to notebook)...and we have to buy at least three items?
- 05 s3: Abby said at least means three or more
- 06 s1: Or more um-hmm... three items... or more... (looks in notebook)...must be
from Emporium catalog?... and everyone have to agree?...
- 07 s2 &3: Yeah
- 08 s1: And Spanish must not be spoken (shakes head and looks at s3) because
we are gonna lose the money if Abby listens to us speak in Spanish
- 09 s3: (nods) Okay I'm... (laughs) (they all start looking through the catalog)
- 10 s1: Oh, we have to decide who we are giving the gifts...
- 11 s2: Abby, our teacher...
- 12 s1: You know what she likes?
- 13 s2: Hmm... no...but...
- 14 s3: Our classmate Javier...all the time he ask for something...
- 15 s1: Just for joke... but ... yeah we all know him...we can select him. (turning to
s2) What you think?
- 16 s2: Yeah... he is fun.
- 17 s1: Okay, let's see the catalog... (Reads) Emporium...Christmas Sales...
remember that they...we are in winter... it is very cold...
- 18 s3: Yes
- 19 s1: Then we had to give him...things that...
- 20 s3: He buy...
- 21 s1: Yeah, they are gonna pretty useful for him
- 22 s3: This look good... Berr...How do you say this... (shows to others.. and
spells)
B-E-R-E-T...
- 23 s2: (Consults a pocket dictionary) Oh, you say beret (/berei/)
(articulates slowly)...
oh, it's a pretty hat.
- 24 s1: Does he use a hat?
- 25 s2: I don't think...
- 26 s1: Let's get something useful...do you all agree?

- 27 s2&3: Yeah
- 28 s3: (points to catalog) clothes? the shirt?
- 29 s2: The shirt?
- 30 s1: The page?
- 31 s3: Umm 17...
- 32 s2: The the shirt...30 dollars ... and the tie....15 dollars
- 33 s1: Oh...they all look good
- 34 s3: Blue, he likes blue...
- 35 s2: Yeah... one tie or two
- 36 s1: One ... what you think? ... this goes with the shirt...
- 37 s3: Yeah
- 38 s1: How much is that....
- 39 s3: (calculates) 29 point 99 and 14 point 99 and tax 8 point 25 percent
- 40 s2: (leaning towards s3 and reading off calculator) 67 point 98
- 41 s1: 67 point 48?with tax?
- 42 s3: Yeah... how to find out...
- 43 s2: Wait....
- 44 s1: Yeah.. find out...
- 45 s3: No that's wrong...
- 46 s1: Let me see(reaches for calculator)...let me check the math
(s1 continues calculating while s2 and s3 read catalogs)
- 47 s1: 29 point 99 plus 14 point 99 That's 44 point 98. We will do tax later.
Okay? So ... we still have a lot of money.
- 48 s3: Buy small wonder
- 49 s2: What's that?
- 50 s3: Perfumes. It's in page....
- 51 s1: No...Let's stick to clothes... something useful...(turning to s2) Do you agree?
- 52 s2: Yah...maybe he wants pants? (looks through the catalog). Seventeen ninety-nine?
- 53 s1: What page?
- 54 s2: Nineteen
- 55 s1: Hmm... they look okay... its okay... you want pants Norma?
- 56 s3: Um-hmm ... for nineteen ninety-nine?
- 57 s2: Seventeen ninety-nine.....(looks at s1, s1 nods).....
- 58 s3: Plus tax
- 59 s2: Yeah.....
- 60 s3: It's eighty...eight twenty-five percent...eight twenty-five percent
- 61 s1: Okay
- 62 s2: (excitedly) hey.. look at this muffler... eleven dollars...
- 63 s1: Muffler? what is it?
- 64 s2: Muffler...it's like...it's like scarf...

APPENDIX

- 65 s3: Is kind of same thing? (in Spanish) Synonymos?
66 s2: Yeah but a muffler keeps you warm ...like a silk scarf... sometimes doesn't keep you warm... so you call that a scarf...but a muffler is... you wear in wintertime
67 s1: (nodding) yeah... can we get two...its winter..he can use everyday...
68 s3: Yeah...
69 s1: You agree?
70 s2: Yeah...how much total now...
71 s3: (in Spanish) noventa y dos...ninety-two sixty-two
72 s1: Remember we cannot speak Spanish please...we lose money...let me see (takes calculator).. ninety two... we still have....
73 s2: What did we buy so far...
74 s1: Let's see....(looks at the notebook) we decide or we agree to buy one cotton dress shirt... and its price was twenty nine ninety nine ... 29 dollars and 99 cents...we bought him a tie for 14 dollars and 99 cents...and also we bought a muffler (inaudible) 11 dollars and 25 cents...we bought him 2 uhh mufflers?.. because it's ah...it's very cold .. cold...outside..hmmm.. we bought him two umm one pair of pants for 17 dollars and 99 cents... the total is 85 dollars and 40 cents
75 s2: Don't forget the tax uhh... that is 8.5 percent... what to say...
76 s1: Multiply I think ...it's seven point twelve...and the total is....92 dollars and... 52 cents
77 s3: How much more we have?
78 s1: We save 8 dollars because we...we have 100 dollars...
79 s2: We could go to the cafeteria? and
80 s1: Drink coffee? (laughs) .. we can buy him a Christmas card....
81 s2: Yeah...that's good
82 s1: (smiles) I hope Javier umm enjoyed our uhh...present because... (inaudible) ... OK, are we done?
83 s2 &3: Yeah.

Excerpts from Metatalk

- 84 T: What did you like about the task...what did you like about it
85 s2: I like everything because here in class is the only moment for me to practice my ... my English
86 T: Okay...you practiced English.. was there anything special you liked about the task
87 s1: I like uh-huh... and this kind of task is very interesting because all of us have the opportunity to develop...our our learning?
88 s2: Yeah

- 89 T: Okay what about you (to s3)...this last activity the shopping activity...
was there something that you didn't like
- 90 s3: I think I don't get the correct word
- 91 T: For example?
- 92 s3: I don't
- 93 s1: I think that ah we...we don't know the correct vocabulary?
- 94 T:: Uh-huh
- 95 s3: Therefore it's hard sometimes to me to do the...the the the multiply?
what do you call that in English?
- 96 T: Okay... so it's the words for calculation you mean?
- 97 s3: Yes ... the math is hard... the the plus and ... and...difficult to explain
- 98 T: So you understand math but it's difficult for you to talk about math
- 99 s3 &1: Yes
- 100 s1: Because we...don't know the vocabulary but it's very interesting because
we don't have the...we have to to know about that
- 101 T: Right right
- 102 s1: Yes
- 103 T: Including tax
- 104 s1: Yes
- 105 T: Was that the most difficult thing?
- 106 s1: Yes, the most difficult
- 107 T: It's okay if it's difficult
- 108 s2: Uh-huh yeah ... ah it's difficult for me too to do tax...
- 109 s3: (laughs)
- 110 T: Was it difficult to agree?
- 111 s1: No... no it was not difficult to do that
- 112 T: No huh-uh
- 113 s2: No... it's okay
- 114 T: Okay what about the things that you bought...was it difficult to agree on the
shirt.
- 115 s2: No
- 116 s3: For me it's hard ah...ah...explain that shirt the jacket the pants...ah is
difficult... for man for woman for children
- 117 T: So it was difficult to see from the catalog?
- 118 s3: Yeah
- 119 T: If it was for a man or children or a woman? it's a little difficult to
understand the catalog
- 120 s3: Yes
- 121 T: Right
- 122 s3: Its...necessary...to see more in a page?
- 123 T: Why?
- 124 s3: ah...for for them um explain...ah for...you understand?

APPENDIX

- 125 T: Or to explain the pants I see I see ...so was the vocabulary of the catalog difficult?
- 126 s3: Yes
- 127 T: Right
- 128 s1: I think we can learn...a lot of things ... for example you can observe the good points and... doing this kind of task...because
- 129 s3: We learn we learn vocabulary, synonyms
- 130 T: Can you all remember any new words that you learned?
- 131 s1: The simple uh muffler?
- 132 T: Muffler
- 133 s3: Beret
- 134 T: Beret (gestures to head)...the hat beret...that was new for you. What about you (to S2)?
- 135 s2: Small wonder
- 136 T: Small wonder was a new kind of word for you?
- 137 s2: It's a new kind of perfume ... new vocabulary...I'd never heard of that
- 138 s3: (inaudible) we don't need to use the same...the same ones... synonyms...
- 139 T: Okay so you learned a bit about synonyms...what else?
- 140 s3: (inaudible)
- 141 T: Pronunciation? what did you learn to pronounce
- 142 s3: Beret (/berei/)
- 143 T: Very good
- 144 T: Okay umm what about English sentences...did you learn any new English sentences
- 145 s1: Yes
- 146 T: Like... do you remember? do you remember what?
- 147 s1: Or how to ask...a question because a question is not is not the same as the statement
- 148 T: So what questions did you learn here or what questions did you practice
- 149 s3: For example, do you agree?
- 150 T: Uh-huh
- 151 s2: What you think?
- 152 T: Ah-ha What do you think? Okay...did you practice that when you were together?
- 153 s1: Yeah
- 154 T: (nods) okay .. (to s3).. what else did you learn from the shopping activity...
- 155 s1: For example the...the additions?
- 156 T: Oh yeah
- 157 S1: Because I...I learn that we have to write down the sub-total?
- 158 T: Uh-huh the sub-total
- 159 S1: After...ah...the tax

- 160 T: Uh-huh okay so you would have done that differently because now you know how to do it.. (to s2)...is there anything you would do differently?
- 161 s2: We know...for example I gave sometimes help for the additions?...
- 162 T: Right so those things you would have done differently...Okay.
(Incomplete)

|