

Factors Affecting Learner's Task Engagement in a Task-Based Course

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Abstract

Research interest on Task-based language learning and teaching (TBLT) has moved from theoretical rational to practice, to task properties and to contexts and the learners as reflected in the themes of international conferences for TBLT. This study investigated factors that affected freshman students' task engagement in a task-based course in a Chinese university. Five surveys of task engagement were carried out over 11 weeks and retrospective structured interviews were done at the end. It was found that the task generating the highest levels of engagement was one that was both fun and most relevant from the learners' perspective. Apart from the features of the tasks, students' knowledge of communication strategies, rapport and their motivation and self-efficacy were also found to influence students' task engagement. In addition to the choice and design of tasks, in a task-based approach the learners also play a big role in shaping their own learning experience. Future studies should explore the dynamics of how learner factors interact with task features in the language classrooms and how learning experience is co-constructed.

Keywords: TBLT, tasks, learner factors, task engagement, task-based course;

1. Introduction

This paper reports on an investigation into the factors that influenced first year university students' task engagement in a task-based course at Shantou University in China over a period of 11 weeks. The study follows the recent trend in the literature to move from theoretical issues to analysis of task-based learning practice, and from consideration of task properties to contexts and the learners. In particular, it tests the claim of Ellis [1] that learner's task performance is co-constructed by task design features, methodological procedures and learner factors.

Very few studies have investigated TBLT from the perspective of learner factors, especial those that influence the learners' performance in task-based lessons. Ellis [2] synthesized different definitions of tasks and concluded that a task should involve some kind of a gap (information gap or opinion gap), a primary focus on meaning, an opportunity for learners to use their own linguistic and non-linguistic resources and a specific communicative outcome. This is on the basis of the definitions proposed from different theoretical fronts: Long's interaction Hypothesis [3], Ellis's developmental problem of L2 acquisition [4], Swain's [5] output hypothesis and social-cultural theory (e.g. see Lantolf [6]; Skehan, [7], etc.). However, the definition of tasks synthesized by Ellis [2] could be well explained from that of the perspective of learner's motivation. Noels, Pelletier, Clement and Vallerand [8] distinguished 3 types of intrinsic motivation: 1) exploring new ideas and knowledge, 2) accomplishment and 3) stimulation. Besides, self-direction is also one of the main elements of motivation [9]. Explained from the perspective of learner's motivation, an information or opinion gap embedded in a task serves as the "hook" to engage the learners, a primary focus on meaning provides a break from dull classroom learning on grammar and vocabulary and possible stimulation of fun experience, an opportunity for learners to use their own linguistic and non-linguistic resources gives a sense of self-direction, while a specific communicative outcome makes the sense of accomplishment easier to achieve.

While the task properties that are most conducive to learning have been investigated intensively, learners' motivation on tasks that shape the actual learning experience has been largely ignored. Dörnyei's [10] process model of learning motivation (pre-actional stage; actional stage and post-actional stage) captures the fluctuating nature of learner's motivation in learning: Learner's orientation towards language learning sets the basis for their motivation, the quality of the learning experience in class further influences the learners' willingness and preparedness to invest their efforts in learning, while how learners evaluate and attribute their learning process further influences their future motivation level. The actional stage corresponds to task-in-process in a task-based approach. Dörnyei [10] identified several factors that influence learner's motivation in this stage: the perceived quality of

the learning activities, sense of autonomy, teachers' and parents' influence, classroom rewards, the influence of others in the classroom and the learner's ability to maintain their motivation level and keep focused. Some of these factors could be manipulated by task design while others are in the wider context of the classroom that influence the learner's decision to invest effort and attention in the task.

The task-based approach in this study was based on the sociocultural theory of language. Lantolf [6] suggests that there are three types of mediation for acquisition: 1) through interaction 2) through private speech 3) through artefacts like tasks and learning apps. Drawing on this, a task-based lesson should provide the students plentiful opportunities for private speech (i.e. Planning time for students to think and organize their language; activities where the students were required to rehearse or record their own speech), pair work and group work. Besides, as Vygotsky [11] put it, interaction yields best mediation effects when it helps to co-construct learners' zones of proximal development (ZPD). Since teachers would be more sensitive than students to notice their interlocutor's gaps of knowledge in speech and more experienced in scaffolding, contrary to the commonly belief that teachers' role should be minimized in a task-based approach, a task-based classroom should instead feature a bigger role of the teacher in tasks in forms of 1) pre-task scaffolding to activate the students' schematic knowledge on certain forms as preparation for tasks and 2) post-task feedback to address students ZPD that the teacher has noticed from the students' task performance. Though this form of teacher-class interaction is not that of the expert-novice one-on-one interaction that research has found to be conducive to acquisition [12], it still has the mediating features of co-construction of meaning and responsiveness in speech.

The research question is:

What factors affect learner's task engagement in a task-based course?

2. Research method

Tasks used in the lessons were designed according to Ellis' [2] definition of tasks. The design of the lessons was based on sociocultural theory. The participants were 25 female and 59 male students from 3 level 1 classes aged between 17 to 19 from Shantou University, China. Each student's task engagement was measured five times—shortly after a task over 11 weeks. Follow-up retrospective structured interviews were carried out in the end. All the surveys and interviews were carried out in Chinese to make sure that students were able to understand what was being asked and that they were able to express their opinions well. Task engagement was measured by a 5-point (from 2 to -2) agree or disagree Likert Scale. And the survey statements were designed based on Philp and Duchesne's multidimensional engagement construct. [13]

The statements in the survey were:

- 1) This activity was able to keep students thinking and focused.
- 2) I tried my best to achieve the task outcome.
- 3) This activity was fun.
- 4) I felt at ease cooperating with others to achieve the task outcome.
- 5) I could use English vocabulary and expressions that I had learned to interact with others in the activity.
- 6) If I practice speaking and listening more, I will do better in class activities.

Out of the 84 students in the 3 classes, 43 students did all the 5 surveys of task engagement and the other 39 students' data were not used due to missing values for some task engagement surveys. Out of the 43 students who took part in all the surveys, 12 were interviewed. Students were selected according to their mean task engagement score to form a representative sample of the full spectrum. And interview questions were designed based on the results of the surveys.

The interview questions were:

- 1) What are the factors that influence your engagement level?
- 2) How do you find task 4 differs from other tasks?

3. Results and discussion

Students' task engagement generally improved over time. Task 4 was found to prompt the highest level of engagement and the second interview question was designed to provide context for this result.

In terms of engagement, most students interviewed mentioned that it is important for task topics to be relevant and meaningful to them, for task steps to be practical and reasonable and the form of tasks to be interesting, especially when competition or socialization is involved. Most students interviewed commented on how their engagement level was affected by the teacher, the atmosphere and the perceived friendliness of their partner and their own motivation level and confidence. They also mentioned that communication skills taught in class helped them to improve their task performance and as a result they engaged better. Most of them agreed that task 4 was most interesting because they could share “real things in their life”. They liked it that it was something that they “had ideas about” and “was interested to listen to”.

Table 1. Descriptive data for the 5 engagement surveys n=43

Task	1	2	3	4	5
Mean	6.4	7.28	6.88	8.19	7.77
Std. Deviation	2.451	2.027	2.745	2.491	2.635

The overall increase in task engagement could result from learning during the course. Factors that the students listed as important to their task engagement confirm those that Dörnyei [10] identified as influencing learner’s actional motivation: 1) self-regulation; 2) the influence of others in the classroom; 3) the quality of the experience and the student’s sense of autonomy. Learners’ task engagement could be manipulated not only by the design of the task but also by the utilization of the classroom environment and intervention strategies. The effect of the task occurs in the broader context of the language classroom supporting Ellis’ [1] claim that the learner factor is as important as task properties and the teacher’s choice of instructional approach in shaping learning experience. Future study of TBLT should investigate the dynamic nature of tasks in the language classroom on how to influence the variables of the learner to bring about better learning results.

Most students interviewed found task 4 the most relevant. Task 4 was a competition for the best advice on how to make us more likable. Students mentioned in their interviews that in task 4, they wanted to know what others thought would make them more likable and they wanted to be chosen to represent their group in the class competition. It seems the relevance of the task to the learner’s life is an important element of task design, helping to prompt higher levels of engagement. More future studies in TBLT should explore the variable of relevance in task design and how it contributes to the overall effects tasks have on the learners.

The findings of this study are suggestive, but drawn from a small sample, making further study of the links between engagement, tasks, and the acquisition of knowledge valuable. In particular, future studies should explore the dynamics of how learner factors interact with task features in the language classrooms and how learning experience is co-constructed.

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