Diversifying Tasks in the English Language Classroom

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Abstract

The use of tasks in the language classroom has been one of the current trends in language teaching. According to Edwards and Willis (2005), task-based language teaching (TBLT) provides contexts for activating learner acquisition processes and promotes second language (L2) learning. This paper reports a study that explores a diverse use of tasks in the English language classroom. The aim of the paper is to describe a task designed for low proficiency L2 learners', and to explore learners' task performance and their use of the L2 in the tasks. The study took place in a tertiary setting in Malaysia, and involved fourteen L2 learners. The task was designed based on Cummins' (1981) framework, which focuses on the role of context and cognitive demands in language development. Learners' worked in pairs, and were observed in the classroom. Each pair of learners' discussions was audio-recorded, which were later analysed for their L2 use. Results indicated that learners' L2 use increased when contextual support is high and cognitive demands is low. This suggests that designing tasks with higher order thinking is a challenge for teachers especially when it involves tertiary learners and requires learners to communicate more in their L2.

Keywords: Task-based language teaching, language acquisition, contextual support, cognitive demands

1. Introduction

The use of tasks in second language (L2) classroom has been a wide area of research in L2 teaching. According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), task-based syllabus aims to facilitate L2 learning, which contributes to its incorporation in language classrooms. This led them to propose the use of pedagogical tasks in the classroom, as the activity has a non-linguistic goal, has a clear outcome, and uses any of the four language skills. It also conveys meaning that reflects real-world language use (Willis & Willis, 2007). According to Castillo (2008), classroom tasks and materials

should be designed to resemble actual use of language for communication. Castillo (2008) suggests teachers to propose tasks and texts that activates previous knowledge and provides enough background information, so that learners are able to grasp the key concepts in the tasks.

In this paper, I report a study that used one task, designed using Cummins' (1981) framework, in the English language classroom. The aim of the paper is to explore the task and how it contributes to learners' language use and their task performance. Cummins (2008) states that if learners are given the opportunity to refer to their L1, it opens up their language awareness in learning the L2. The use of Cummins' (1981) framework enables me to empirically test his claims on L1 use in relation to task difficulty. In the context of the study, the L1 refers to Bahasa Malaysia (BM): the national language of Malaysia and the language of the participants of the study; while the L2 refers to English language which is the second language of Malaysia, is taught in schools and universities, and the language of instruction for content courses where the study took place.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Task-based language teaching

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is a current approach to L2 teaching that represents a strong version of Communicative Language Teaching (Ellis, 2003; Willis, 1996). It started in the 1970s when scholars argued that language interaction should teach both grammar and meaning (Skehan, 2003). Task-based approach is beneficial as it offers the opportunity for 'natural' learning inside the classroom, emphasizes meaning over form, provides learners a rich input of target language, is intrinsically motivating and learner-centered, develops communication, and can be used with other approach (Ellis, 2009).

According to Ellis (2009), in TBLT, language learning will progress most successfully if teaching aims to create contexts that consider learners' natural language learning ability. This is supported by Samuda and Bygate (2008), who suggest classroom learning to be connected to students' personal experiences, or classroom teaching to be authentic. A task focuses on meaning, and there is a need for learners to convey information, express an opinion or infer meaning, using their own linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge in order to complete the activity (Ellis, 2009). Task-based approaches require a skilful, flexible, and knowledgeable practitioner (Skehan, 1998), and involves a complex teacher role (Carless, 2008). According to Ellis (2009), the tasks must suit the proficiency levels of the students and result in appropriate L2 use; thus, teachers need a clear understanding of what a task is, and be involved in the development of the task materials.

Studies on second language acquisition (SLA) have investigated tasks from a theoretical (language processing), and a methodological (instructional design) perspective (Bygate, Skehan & Swain, 2001; Crookes & Gass, 1993; Ellis, 2000; Foster, 1998; Foster & Skehan, 1996; Robinson, 2001; Skehan, 1998; Skehan & Foster, 1997, 1999; Swain & Lapkin, 2000; Willis, 1996; Yule & Powers, 1994). However, these studies lack in looking at the role of contextual and cognitive

support in tasks. Studies that support contextual use in tasks provide relevance to learners' prior knowledge and L1 use in task performance. Swain and Lapkin (2000) argue for the role of L2 learners' use of L1 in completing tasks. They stated that if learners are not allowed to use their L1 to carry out tasks that are linguistically and cognitively complex, it rejects L1 as an important cognitive tool in their L2 learning. Cummins (2008) claims, if students' prior knowledge is encoded in their L1, then their L1 would exist in the learning of their L2.

Thus, to ensure learners achieve successful L2 learning, teachers should consider learners' background knowledge and include it in the task. For contextual support to contribute to the learning of content, it must start with the activation of learners' background knowledge (Castillo, 2008). Although the language class aims for academic language development, teachers should not neglect what learners have in their minds so that L2 learning can become a memorable experience for L2 learners. Context and cognitive demands are also important elements for teachers to consider the types of tasks for learners (Castillo, 2008). When learners are provided with high contextual support, they should be able to perform cognitively demanding tasks successfully (Garcia, 2009).

2.2 Cummins' (1981) model

Cummins (1981) claims there is a relationship between contextual support and cognitive demands in communicative tasks. The constructs are distinguished by the extent to which the meaning being communicated is supported by contextual or interpersonal cues (such as gestures, facial expressions, and intonation present in face-to-face interaction) or is dependent on the amount of information that must be processed immediately through the communicative context (Cummins, 2000, 2001, 2008). "Context" is constituted by what we bring to a task (internal), and the range of supports that may be incorporated in the task itself (external) (Cummins, 2008). Context-embedded communication is more typical of the everyday world outside the classroom, but context-reduced communication reflects tasks with many linguistic demands of the classroom. Cognitively undemanding tasks consist of words that are familiar to learners, and thus require little active cognitive involvement; cognitively demanding tasks are very open ended and subjective, and require learners to process information.

In cognitively demanding tasks, L2 learners are expected to be fluent in their academic language. They should be able to express and support opinions, formulate hypotheses, propose different solutions, describe, generalize, ask and answer informational and clarifying questions, classify, relate information, compare and contrast, explain cause and effect, interpret, infer, draw conclusions, summarize, evaluate, critique justify analyze, and persuade (Dutro & Moran, 2003; Williams, 2001; Zwiers, 2008). This means that they are able to use academic language to describe higher order thinking, complexity, and abstraction as clearly as possible. Cummins (1981) proposed a model (Figure 1) for designing tasks based on the range of contextual support and degree of cognitive involvement in communicative activities.

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│        Cognitively undemanding communication          │
│                                                        │
│                     A        C                         │
│                                                        │
│   Context  ────────────────────────  Context          │
│   Embedded                           Reduced          │
│   Language                           Language         │
│                     B        D                         │
│        Cognitively demanding communication            │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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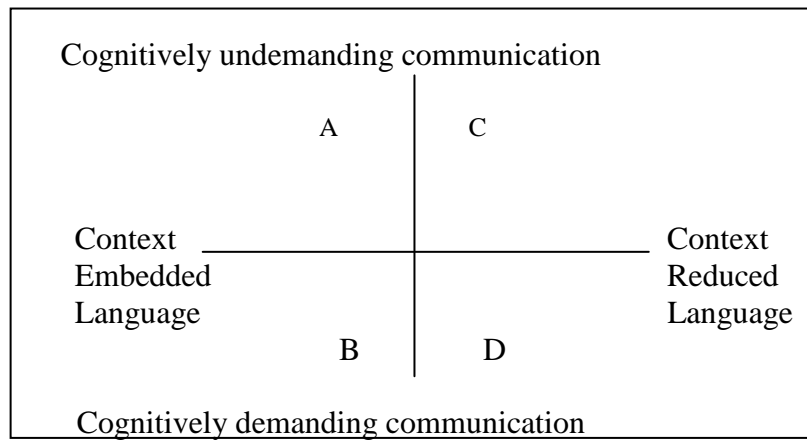
Figure 1
Range of contextual support and degree of cognitive involvement in communicative activities
(Cummins, 1981)

The model is represented in four quadrants. In Quadrant A, tasks reflect face-to-face social conversation i.e. greeting someone; in Quadrant B, tasks require learners to process information based on the contextual support provided i.e. comparing and contrasting, seeking solutions or explaining and justifying; in Quadrant C, tasks have less contextual support but do not involve learners in too much information processing i.e. listening to a story, copying information from a text and retelling a story; and in Quadrant D, tasks require learners to master academic functions (Cummins, 2000) by carrying out tasks that are minimally supported by familiar contextual or interpersonal cues, and require high levels of cognitive involvement for successful task completion i.e. arguing a case, interpreting evidence and evaluating and analyzing critically.

According to Cummins (2008), some context-embedded activities are clearly just as cognitively-demanding as context-reduced activities. This is because learners may have different interpretation of what is context-embedded or cognitively demanding in the tasks, due to the differences in internal attributes such as prior knowledge or interest (Cummins, 1984). The more students know and understand, the easier it is for them to make sense of academic language, since there is internal support for understanding the messages (Garcia, 2009). Thus, it is important to distinguish the dimensions of contextual embeddedness and cognitive demand.

Cummins' (1981) theory highlights the role of context as fundamental to supporting children's language and literacy development and the cognitive demands of language. The framework distinguishes the extent to which the meaning being communicated is supported by contextual or interpersonal cues or dependent on linguistic cues that are largely independent of the immediate communicative context (Cummins, 2008). His theory has proved helpful in identifying and developing

appropriate tasks for bilingual students. According to Cummins (1981), students need both these aspects of proficiency to engage in successful social communication and participation in content classrooms as students' language assessment becomes problematic if they only perform well in social conversations but do poorly on academic tasks.

Through this framework, I designed tasks based on my knowledge of the learners involved in the study, which helped me to look at learners' language use while they were engaged in the tasks. This allowed me to see how language use is affected by the different levels of task difficulty, which is signified by the different levels of cognitive and contextual support. In this sense, I explored how learners used their L1 to master the socially and academically challenging aspects of the L2 needed for task success and language learning, and looked at their experiences and achievements in task-based communicative activities which involved them with language use.

3. Research Objectives

The aim of the paper is to describe a task designed for low proficiency L2 learners', and to explore learners' task performance and their use of the L2 in the tasks.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research design

In the study, I used a qualitative approach, employing systematic observations and data collection. I collected the data and then compared them for differences and similarities through the use of the task and learners' task performance. This allowed the data gathered to be more comprehensive (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006).

4.2 Participants

4.2.1 The learners

The study was conducted in a tertiary institution in Malaysia, as the problem involved both L1 and L2. The participants of this study were fourteen first year university learners from the same program in a faculty. They were low proficiency English language learners, who scored Band 1 or Band 2 in the *Malaysian University English Test* (MUET). MUET is a national examination taken prior to enrolling into public universities in Malaysia. The result is based on a six-band scale (Band 1 to Band 6), with Band 6 as the best score, and Band 1 as the lowest score.

3.2.2 The teacher-researcher

In this study, I became the teacher of my self-designed instructional class, as I was familiar with the lessons that I had prepared, and the issue or research problem that I wished to investigate. It also allowed me to have an in-depth understanding of what happened in the actual setting as I experienced it together with the learner participants. I had multiple roles in different stages of the study: teacher-researcher-observer. As a teacher, I planned the lessons and took charge of learner participants throughout the class, and helped the learners. As a researcher, I had issues to investigate, documents to be distributed and data to be collected, and ensuring that I

do not interfere with the learners. As an observer, I wanted to see learner behavior when they completed the task, and took notes of this as they might contribute to the data of the study.

4.3 The tasks

The task that I used in the study was an information-gap task, which is named Spot-the-difference. I adapted the tasks from http://www.cleveland.police.uk/young-people/Spot-the-Difference.aspx. I chose the task as it related to students' life and environment, and the task can be made simple or challenging, which allowed me to place the tasks in different quadrants in Cummins' (1981) model. The task was suited based the level of the learners and the difficulty level of the tasks based of the model used.

In this task, the teacher distributes a picture of a policeman to each student in a pair. There are 2 sets of policeman pictures. Each student in each pair receives a different set of picture. Students have to find the difference in each other's picture, without showing their picture to their partner. Students then compared their answers with other pairs.

Spot the Difference

How good are your detective skills?
There are 10 differences in the Police Officer images below. Can you spot them?

5. Data Analysis

Originally, I located the Spot-the-difference task in quadrant B of Cummins' (1981) model. This was because the picture was familiar to learners and that the task was cognitively undemanding. However, when learners did the tasks in pairs, not many of them managed to find the differences in each other's pictures as they had difficulty to communicate to their partner in finding the answers to the task. They also seemed unable to complete the task as although the picture was originally assumed to be related to their life, they complained that they were not familiar with the picture of a foreign police officer. This shows that they needed a more local context to help them complete the task, i.e. picture of a local police officer.

Thus, with the difficulties the learners faced, the task location that I originally located, quadrant B, does not seem to suit learners' level of knowledge and language proficiency. Instead, the task seems to be more suitable to be located in quadrant D, as it seemed to be cognitively challenging to learners. One of the possible ways to make the task more relevant and easier for students would be to provide them with a coloured version of the picture, and change the task using a local picture. This might be better for low proficiency L2 learners, in order for them to speak more L2 in a contextually-embedded and cognitively undemanding task.

6. Findings

I re-analysed my original distribution of tasks and compared it with Cummins' (1981) framework. At this stage, I discovered that some of the tasks in the original distribution did not suit the quadrant that I had determined earlier, which forced me to re-locate the tasks. Tasks were either familiar or unfamiliar to learners, and involved low or high levels of thinking. This was so that they would reflect the four quadrants of Cummins' (1981) matrix of contextual support and cognitive demands in designing communicative tasks. Tasks that are familiar to learners and have low cognitive demands are regarded as low-level tasks and non-challenging as the words are simple for the learners to understand and use, enabling learners to comprehend, process and complete the tasks.

Overall, my re-analysis of the tasks involved a re-location and a refinement of task distribution. More refinement was necessary once the learners' responses were analysed. This is important as the task distribution reflects how I analysed learners' responses in relation to where I have located the tasks. In theory, each learner has their own view of the tasks, which reflects the overall task locations and makes it complex to match it to Cummins' (1981) model.

7. Discussion

In looking at learners' response to where I have distributed the tasks, it is clear that teachers have to consider what the learners want so it is not just a case of teachers planning and then assuming that students can perform more or less well in different quadrants (based on Cummins' work). Instead, they also have to look at what the individual learners bring with them, their background knowledge and the approach they bring to the class. Studies that have investigated these variables have looked at teachers designing the tasks, but very few studies have investigated learners' perspectives and prior experiences in relation to tasks. This view contributed to the choice of participants in my study, as I wanted to explore how learners understand task difficulty and is confirmed by the ways in which I had to re-consider the allocation of the tasks after the instructional phase.

8. Conclusion

The tasks that I designed focused on communicative tasks targeted at low proficiency learners of English. According to Pica et al. (1993), language is best taught and learned through interaction; thus employing communicative tasks allow learners to use language to exchange information and communicate ideas, and share ideas and opinions, collaborating towards a single goal, or competing to achieve individual goals. In designing the tasks to suit the needs of the learners, the researcher considered the place of the tasks in Cummins' (1981) matrix. Locating the tasks prior to the actual tasks being carried out was not easy as the tasks challenged different level of thinking and provided different level of contextual support. In theory, each learner had their own views of the tasks, which affected the overall task locations and made it complex to match it to Cummins' (1981) model. This shows that in selecting or designing tasks, teachers have to consider what the learners want so that it is not just a case of teachers planning and then assuming that

learners can perform more or less well in different dimensions. Instead, they also have to look at what the learners bring with them, their background knowledge and the approach they bring into the class (Darmi, 2014). On the whole, the findings reported in this study has shown that Cummins' (1981) model for designing communicative tasks can be useful in task design or selection. However, Cummins (2000) claims that language and content will be acquired most successfully when learners are challenged cognitively, provided that the contextual and linguistic supports or scaffolds are available for successful task completion (p. 71).

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