A Critique on Swain and Lapkin’s “Focus on Form through Collaborative Dialogue: Exploring Task Effects”

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Keywords: Critique, Task Effect, Collaborative Dialogue.

Abstract. Linguistic accuracy is one important goal for second language learning. In order to help learners focus on the accuracy of their linguistic output, various approaches have been tried through classroom procedures. Swain and Lapkin’s (2001) “Focus on Form through Collaborative Dialogue: Exploring Task Effects” reports on a study of Focus-on-Form through task-based instruction. This paper intends to critique Swain and Lapkin’s (2001) research article, including (1) a presentation of the article, (2) a critique of the article, and (3) suggestions for modification and extension.

Presentation of the Research Article

The Literature Review

The background of the study is two-fold. On the one hand, Swain’s (1985) experience in French immersion education reminds her of the inadequacy of comprehensible input; on the other hand, researchers realize the limitations of traditional grammar instruction yet reach no consensus on “new” effective ways (Lyster, 1995; Swain, 1996).

Swain and Lapkin (2001, p.101) believe that tasks can direct students’ attention to form “without losing sight of the meaning”, and research on using tasks to stimulate talk (Swain and Lapkin, 1998). Thus, a lot of areas have been examined concerning task effects and learning processes: (1) whether learners can notice and fill the gaps in output (Swain and Lapkin, 1995), (2) whether learners can use output as “a hypothesis of how to convey their intended meaning” (Swain, 1995; Swain and Lapkin, 2001), and (3) whether learners can reflect on their language use (Swain, 1998; 2000). Studies suggest that this kind of talk occurs when learners perform collaboratively in communicative tasks (Donato, 1994; LaPierre, 1994; Swain and Lapkin, 1998). Some types of tasks lead to a focus on form in the process of constructing meaning (Kowal and Swain, 1997; Swain, 1998).

Communicative tasks can provide more opportunities for meaning negotiation, thus improving second language acquisition (Pica et al., 1993). Two kinds of views toward communicative tasks are reviewed. The majority of scholars, including Nunan (1989), believe that communicative tasks pay more attention on meaning rather than form. However, some scholars argue that those tasks involve explicit focus on form could also be viewed as communicative ones (Swain, 1997).

The Research Questions and Hypotheses

In order to find out pedagogical ways to enhance Focus-on-Form among immersion students, Swain begins to investigate on effects of various task types. In the study I present here, two communicative tasks with similar content and different nature are used. One is a jigsaw task which is mostly likely to foster negotiation of meaning (Pica et al., 1993); the other is a dictogloss task which can lead to a focus on form (Kowal and Swain, 1997).

After determining the tasks for research, Swain and Lapkin (2001) propose their research hypothesis: “students doing the dictogloss tasks would focus more on form than the students doing the
jigsaw tasks” (p. 101). What is more, Swain and Lapkin (2001) also anticipate that more accuracy can be achieved in “students’ production” with the dictogloss tasks.

The Research Design and Methodology

The subjects of the research are students of grade 8 from two French immersion classes of the same school. The two classes are similar in terms of students’ socio-economic background, language proficiency, and academic experiences of immersion education. Students in Class J are told to work in pairs to co-construct a story based on eight pictures. The jigsaw task involves oral presentation and meaning negotiation before actual writing. Students in Class D take part in the dictogloss task which requires them to listen to a passage twice and take some notes. Then the participants will reconstruct the passage with their partners in writing. Since the passage used in the dictogloss is the product of picture narration by three native speakers of French, the content similarity in the two tasks can be ensured. The overall procedure of the study goes for a period of five weeks, and major activities can be summarized in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Main Activities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Pre-test administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Task type familiarization session (Focus: adjectives agreement)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Data-gathering session: mini-lesson and tasks implementation with tape-recording (Focus: pronominal verbs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Tape transcription and additional test items development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Class-specific post-test administration</td>
</tr>
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</table>

The pre-test is designed based on students’ interactions in the pilot study. Three item types are included: type A and type B focus on students’ grammar use, while type C pays more attention to lexical use. The post-test contains all pre-test items and some additional class-specific items developed after task implementation. Students’ written narratives will also be scored by two experienced teachers with a five-point rating scale to “evaluate content, organization, vocabulary, morphology and syntax” (Swain and Lapkin, 2001, p.103). Another important construct used in the study is language-related episode (LRE) which is defined as a part of a dialogue where learners discuss, question and correct their language use (Swain and Lapkin, 1995). LREs will be counted in the study, and Swain and Lapkin (2001, p.104) claims that a consensus has been achieved in “identifying and classifying LREs.”

The Results and Discussions

The qualitative analyses of LREs show three “salient differences” between the two tasks: (1) the stimulus of dictogloss task is auditory, while jigsaw is visual; (2) the dictogloss task “provides a linguistic model”, while jigsaw does not; and (3) the dictogloss requires a process of sequencing events, while jigsaw does not. The quantitative results of LREs go against Swain and Lapkin’s (2001) initial hypothesis, since no significant differences of form-based LREs between the two groups. However, standard deviations of the range of LREs in Class D are smaller than those of Class J. Similar results have been found when researchers examine tasks differences in terms of time on task and quality of written narratives. Although no obvious differences have been found between the two tasks,
figures indicate that the dictogloss task may constrain students’ language production. A careful examination of pronominal verbs used in writing suggests that a higher accuracy can be attained through dictogloss tasks.

As for test outcomes, comparisons of average scores suggest that no significant differences surface between Class J and Class D as well as between pre- and post-test performances. However, a lot of evidence of language learning can be found in students’ collaborative dialogues.

Swain and Lapkin (2001) admit that the results of the study go beyond their anticipations. Fewer differences have been found with regard to task effects on focusing on form. One important finding of the study is that “the use of the dictogloss task may focus students’ attention, thus constraining students’ output somewhat more than the jigsaw task” (ibid., p.110). Besides, the dictogloss students may produce more correct pronominal verbs than the jigsaw students, and their attention may be directed to “logical and temporal sequencing” in the process of task completion. The different nature of task stimuli may also lead to different kinds of LRPns.

Swain and Lapkin (2001) also provide possible reasons for the similar effects the two tasks bring. One is that the mini-lesson before task implementation has drawn students’ attention on relevant linguistic forms; the other is that there is a tendency to focus on form in producing written language, especially in collaborative writing.

Critique of the Research Article

Clarity and Replicability

Generally, the study is presented clearly and logically in the article with a lot of topics and variables being discussed. Considering the criterion in clarity and replicability, three areas in the article could be improved. Firstly, the authors fail to clarify the language used in collaborative dialogues. Do the students have freedom in choosing languages or are they required to use a specific language? Since the students in the study are L2 learners of French, their interactions in L1 English would be quite different. Examples of LREs show that they may use either English or French or a combination of the two. Secondly, the article does not tell clearly whether the students know their performances will be recorded. I doubt an awareness of being recorded or not will influence one’s performance in collaborative dialogues. Thirdly, the study is unclear about the number of participants in the quantitative analyses of LREs. Although Class J has 35 students, only 12 pairs are examined the number of LREs in Table 5.1. However, the number of pairs changes to 13 when calculating the time on the tasks in Table 5.2. No explanation is given on the change or on the number of students involved in the quantitative data analyses.

Internal Validity

In general, the study is an insightful and meaningful research in spite of its failure to prove the authors’ initial hypothesis. The process of the study is well-arranged, and the size of research participants is big enough and suitable. As for the handling of variables, Swain and Lapkin (2001) present the results for five variables: task nature, quantity of LREs, time on the task, quality of written narratives, and test outcomes. Although various kinds of data are involved in the study, the data are analyzed in a convincing way. With regard to research design and methodology, some defects or deficiencies can be discussed in the followings:

In my opinion, it is risky to use language-related episode (LRE) as a main measurement in collecting evidence of Focus-on-Form. Attention to language forms does not need to be reflected in spoken output or metalinguistic dialogues. Due to some individual differences, some students may pay attention to forms and improve their accuracy in writing without announcing or discussing them with partners. LREs only show an incomplete picture of task effects on Focus-on-Form.
For dictogloss students, they may discuss their “findings” with partners after listening to the passage twice. However, their linguistic “findings” or conclusions drawn after discussion may be incorrect. The study fails to distinguish positive LREs from negative ones.

In defining language-related episode (LRE), the authors classify LREs into two groups: “lexis-based” and “form-based”. In practice, this classification is difficult to handle, especially in those inflectional languages. A change in a lexical item goes along with a change in its form. The study fails to specify its criteria in identifying and classifying LREs. Although the authors claim that research team members have achieved consensus, it does not guarantee that they have gained good criteria. The validity of the criteria is crucial to the success of the study. Different criteria may result in different number of LREs, and consequent LREs also form the basis of test development.

**External Validity**

Since the purpose of the research is to examine effects of some pedagogical tasks, it will surely have some implications for task-based instruction. Swain and Lapkin (2001, p.111) claim that task value “depends upon the instructional goals of the teacher.” They also generalize some possible applications of jigsaw and dictogloss in teaching. Jigsaw can be used to inspire linguistic creativity, while dictogloss can enhance linguistic accuracy. As to some limitations in terms of external validity, I want to focus on the following two points:

Firstly, the research is conducted with much control at a risk of losing its naturalness. Swain and Lapkin (1995) believe that learners can notice and fill “gaps” through output. However, learners need time to notice and enough interaction to analyze in collaborative dialogues. In the present study, students only spend an average of 10 minutes on a task. Although the article does not report a time limit on task completion, we can imagine how limited interaction can be in such a short period of time. LRE identified in collaborative dialogues is simply retrieval of information from memory rather than genuine Focus-on-Form. Students’ mistakes of overgeneralization are the results of hasty analyses and time constraints. Maybe longer passages can be used in the study or more time should be encouraged for collaborative dialogues.

Secondly, I doubt whether the findings of the research can be applicable to other L2/FL learners. French immersion students have attained a certain level of linguistic complexity due to their academic curriculum. Implicit grammar instruction through communicative tasks can direct their attention to linguistic forms, thus improving accuracy. Situations in other L2 learners may be different. For some, even if they notice the form through collaborative dialogues, they are still not sure why and how the grammatical feature can be applied into their writing. What they are lacking is a certain level of linguistic complexity which can be attained through explicit grammar instruction. Mere application of communicative tasks is not enough to achieve linguistic accuracy.

**Author’s Assessment**

Since jigsaw and dictogloss can generate “similar and substantial proportion of form-focused LREs”, Swain and Lapkin (2001, p.111) believe that it is a welcome finding for French immersion education. They also conclude that the study extend our understanding of “attentional processes” within L2 instruction (Swain and Lapkin, 2001). To some extent, their claim is justifiable. Our understanding of the effects and implications of the two tasks have been enhanced. What the article lacks are some sensible suggestions for future research.

**Suggestions for Modification and Extension**

In order to achieve the research goals set in the study more effectively, some modifications need to be made. Firstly, clear and valid criteria for identifying and classifying LREs should be specified in the
study. Secondly, negative LREs should be distinguished from positive LREs. Thirdly, we should pay more attention to the linguistic accuracy of written narratives in the study. Possibly, writings in the study can be compared with students’ previous writings with similar grammatical focus yet without the task influence. Differences between writings may be viewed as task effects. LREs are still important measurement of the study, and they provide opportunities for increasing accuracy in written narratives.

To extend this research, I think some useful research areas can be further investigated. Based on my own reflections on English language teaching, two suggestions are proposed here. Firstly, we can conduct studies on how to combine explicit and implicit grammar instruction with the help of pedagogical tasks. Secondly, we can also investigate on how to implement tasks in the classroom. Sometimes how a task is used is more important than the task itself. Swain and Lapkin’s (2001) study shows me the complexity of task effects, and also arouses my interest to study more on how to integrate tasks into language teaching.

References


