Influence of Planning on Students' Language Performance in Task-based Language Teaching

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Abstract

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is an important second language teaching method. Planning is one of the significant factors in the studies of TBLT. This paper will mainly discuss the influence of planning on students' language performance in TBLT.

Keywords: Task-based language teaching, Planning, Language performance

1. Introduction

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is a realization of communicative language teaching. It has received much attention from second language acquisition (SLA) researchers and L2 teachers. They provide many definitions of task. Planning and its influence in task-based language performance are also extensively studied in the literature. This paper will focus on the planning in task-based teaching. I will firstly review some of the understandings of task which is the key term in TBLT. Then I will discuss planning in TBLT and thirdly I will explain a set of measurements for students' language performances adopted in this paper. Fourthly I will review research studies concerning the influence of planning on students' language performances in TBLT. At the same time as reviewing, I will make some comments on the literatures in order to show the gaps in the previous studies.

2. Understanding of Task

In the early 1980s, influenced by Widdowson's (1978) assumption about developing capacity to express meaning, many books about communicative activities were published in the United Kingdom (Tomlinson, 1998).

Today task replacing communicative activity is frequently used in SLA and second language teaching (Rubdy, 1998). There are different definitions of task because it has been examined from different perspectives. Here I would like to review some definitions generally grouped into two categories: real world tasks and classroom learning tasks.

Real world task definition has no specific attention on language outcomes. Long (1985) defined it as "a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward" (p.89). More definitions are about classroom learning. Breen (1987) understands task as "a range of workplans" (p.23). Nunan's (1989) view on task is commonly cited, which is "a piece of classroom work" involving "learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language" (p.10). Skehan (1998a) analyzed many understandings of task and outlined four defining criteria.

1. meaning is primary;
2. there is a goal which needs to be worked towards;
3. the activity is outcome-evaluated;
4. there is a real-world relationship (p.268).

Recently, Ellis (2003) raises an updated definition, which covers Skehan's (1998a) four criteria and adds that "a task is a workplan" requiring learners' cognitive processes.

Although these definitions of task are various, they have some points in agreement. A classroom task is an activity with a specific goal and involves communicative language use in the process. Task goes beyond the common classroom exercise because task has a certain relationship with the real-world. The kind of discourse that arises from task is intended to resemble that which occurs naturally in the real world (Ellis, 2000).

3. Explanation of Planning

Planning for TBLT could happen in different levels, such as linguistic elements plan (e.g. choice of words or phrases),

sentences plan, structure plan (Clark and Clark, 1977). Ellis (2005) identifies the principal types of task planning, which seems based on general acceptance. Planning in task-based learning and teaching can be cataloged into two kinds: pre-task planning and within-task planning. Pre-task planning includes rehearsal and strategic planning. Rehearsal refers to the fact that students are given a chance to perform the task before the formal performance of the task. It involves task repetition as the first time performance is viewed as preparation for the later performance. Strategic planning refers to students' preparation of what the content is and how the content is expressed for the task. Within-task planning could be further divided into pressured or unpressured. It is grouped according to the time given to students to prepare. In an unpressured planning, students can have a careful plan on their performance of the task. In a pressured planning, students need to rapidly prepare their performance. There is a problem with the division of the within-task planning in my opinion. Ellis (2005) said that "within-task planning can be differentiated according to the extent to which the task performance is pressured or unpressured" (p.4). But he does not make clear the distinction between pressured planning and unpressured planning. In my opinion, the distinction between pressure and unpressure lies in the specific learner's psychological reflection to the tasks. So it is hard to identify the distinction.

4. Measurements for students' language performances

The general goal of foreign language learning, as Han (2004) suggests, is the effective use of target language. Skehan (1998b) proposed to separate learner's general goal into three specific areas: accuracy, complexity and fluency. Accuracy relates to learner's understanding of the rules and the capability to perform against these rules. Complexity deals with the restructuring interlanguage system to become more elaborate and structured. Fluency basically refers to the capability to "mobilize" (p.46) the learner's current linguistic sources to effectively communicate in real time. Skehan also suggested that learners' language performances vary in these areas. These measurements cover both speaking and writing skills. I think it is necessary to set up the separate measurements for speaking and writing within those three areas because of the cognitive and contextual differences in speaking and writing. However, they will not be the focus of the literature review. Yet the separation of performance measurements would result in regrouping these study results in literature review.

5. Review of previous research about influence of planning on students' language performances

Much research has been produced to examine the influence of planning on students' language performance in task-based teaching. I will review some of them in the groups of pre-task planning and within-task planning.

5.1 Pre-task planning

5.1.1 Rehearsal

The results of these pieces of research show that rehearsal has positive influence on students' language performance. Bygate (1996) made a comparison of a student's retelling of the same story in two times and found that rehearsal increased complexity of the performance. Bygate (2001) did a larger study on the influence of practicing a type of task on second time performance and on performance of another new task of this type. It was proved that practice led to greater fluency and complexity of performance on the same task, but it did not help with performance of another task of the same type. Lynch and McLean (2000; 2001) made a study and showed that recycling output enhanced accuracy and fluency. Nemeth and Kormos (2001) found that repeating an argumentation task increased the number of supports provided by the students for their statements. More studies about the influence of rehearsal on the performance of a new task of the same type are necessary. Repeating the same task is not realistic in L2 teaching context. Whether there is a transferring effect of planning from a task to another task of the same type worth future research. Besides, there is no research focusing on how long the influence of rehearsal or repetition can last in students' performances.

5.1.2 Strategic planning

Strategic planning has been extensively studied and its influence on the three areas of students' language performance (i.e. fluency, accuracy, and complexity) has been found.

Results of some studies show that strategic planning enhances fluency. Foster (1996), Foster and Skehan (1996), and Skehan and Foster (1997) reported that planners had greater fluency than non-planners. Ortega (1999) showed that L2 Spanish students had faster speaking speed if they had planned strategically. Wendel (1997, in Ellis, 2005) found that the planner produced more syllables in a certain period of time and less pauses in two narrative tasks. Yuan and Ellis (2003) also discussed the influence of strategic planning on fluency.

However, results of studies I reviewed do not show the influence of strategic planning on accuracy very clearly. Ellis (1987) suggested that planning helped students use regular past tense correctly. Mehnert's (1998) study showed the difference in accuracy of the students with 1-minute planning and the students without planning. But Yuan and Ellis (2003) did not show any influence of strategic planning on accuracy in their study. Some other studies supported that strategic planning influenced students' language performance only to some extent. Ortega (1999) provided a mixed finding, which was that planning enhanced accuracy in the aspect of Spanish noun-modifier agreement but not in the

use of articles. Foster and Skehan (1996) showed that the type of task influenced the effect of planning on accuracy. Planned students had greater accuracy than the non-planned in the decision making task, but no evidence showed the effect of planning on accuracy in the narrative task. Foster and Skehan (1999) found that when planning was teacher-guided, its influence on accuracy was greatest, but directing of focus-on-form had no influence on accuracy.

The results of studies about the positive influence of strategic planning on complexity are clear. Crookes (1989) showed that 10- minute planned students had more complex sentences and a broader lexical range. Foster and Skehan (1996) found that planners could use more subordination. Skehan and Foster (1997) suggested that planning led to greater accuracy or complexity, and complexity and accuracy were trade-off. Mehnert (1998) showed the positive influence on 10-minute planners' complexity of performance. The 1-minute and 5-minute planners' complexity performance stayed the same level as the non-planners. Foster and Skehan (1999), Yuan and Ellis (2003) also found that strategic planning had a positive influence on complexity.

5.2 Within-task planning

5.2.1 Unpressured within-task planning

Unpressured within-task planning positively influences students' accuracy of performance. There are three studies on this topic. Hulstijn and Hulstijn (1984) did a study on L2 Dutch students. They were asked to perform short oral narrative tasks in four learning conditions with interactive combination of two variables: time (students were asked to speak as fast as possible or to task as much time as they like) and guided attention (students were directed to focus on form or meaning). They found that time itself did not influence the accuracy of word order, but in the condition of guided attention to focus on form the influence of time is evident. That is to say, if students use the time on the consideration of structure or grammar, their performances are more accurate. If they use the time on the consideration of content, there is no influence of time on accuracy. Ellis (1987) compared learners' performance oral and written tasks in three conditions. In the study, firstly the students were asked to write a narrative given as much time as they wanted. Secondly the students were asked to retell the same narrative without reference to the written ones. Thirdly the students were asked to tell a story according to a picture given to them and with possible least chance to prior-planning. So the three conditions were like this: the first task had online planning and pre-task planning. The second task had no online planning but pre-task planning. The third task had no online planning or pre-task planning. Ellis found that students used regular past tense forms most accurately in task 1, least accurately in task 3 and the task 2 was in the middle. Ellis explained that the performance difference between task 1 and task 2 was because of whether there was the online planning. Crookes' (1989) comments informed us that different performance between task 1 and 2 also could be because of the task types (task 1 was a written task but task 2 was an oral task.).

5.2.2 Pressured within-task planning

Tests are the typical pressured contexts in which L2 performance is mentioned. The study about the influence of planning on students' language performance of tasks in tests has great significance. The findings are useful for tests designing and evaluation. I review two studies here.

Wigglesworth (1997) produced a study, in which 107 adult ESL learners were asked to perform five tasks of the Australian Assessment of Communicative Skills test in planned and unplanned conditions. Performances of 28 learners were analyzed against the measures of complexity, fluency and accuracy. The findings showed that there were obvious differences in learners' performances between planned and unplanned conditions, especially for the high-proficiency learners and in the task with a high cognitive load. Elder and Mcnamara (2002) examined the effect of 3-minute planning on task performance of 201 ESL students. They found no obvious effect on task performance.

Planning in tests might have positive influence on students' language performance but there are not enough studies to prove it. Besides, when the influence of planning in pressured and unpressured contexts is examined, students' psychological dimensions need to be considered.

6. Conclusion

Task is the key term in TBLT. It is necessary to make a clear understanding of it before examining into any specific areas in TBLT. Although there are many different understandings of task, some agreements are achieved. In TBLT, planning is a key element, and students' language performances are measured from the aspects of complexity, accuracy and fluency. The influence of planning on students' language performance is mainly examined in the literature. Pre-task planning has positive influence on students' language performances. However, the influence of strategic planning on accuracy is not very clearly. Unpressured within-task planning positively influences students' accuracy of performance. Planning in tests might have positive influence on students' language performance but there are not enough studies to prove it. Some critical comments are provided as the literature is reviewed.

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