

Marita Schocker-v. Ditfurth
What do we know about how foreign languages are learned?
A pedagogical perspective on tasks

(Folien zum Vortrag von Marita Schocker-von Ditfurth, PH Freiburg,
 46. BAG Villigst 2008)

Two perspectives on *task* (Lernaufgabe) as tool / vehicle:

Academic LAQ research	Practitioner Research
------------------------------	------------------------------

- to identify the task features that are likely to support learning
- to motivate learners to process and produce language

“Second language acquisition (SLA) researchers and language teachers both seek to elicit samples of language use from learners. In the case of researchers these samples are needed to investigate how second language (L2) learning takes place. In the case of teachers, these samples serve as the means by which learners can be helped to learn and as evidence that successful learning is taking place”.
 (Ellis 2003: 1).

Focus of my talk

- (1) What can teachers learn from academic (LAQ) research?
- (2) What can teachers learn from practitioner (case-study-based) research?
- (3) Where are we now?

(1) Academic LAQ research

Focus

Task as a tool (a workplan) to understand language learning (focus on the quality and quantity of learner output as a result of different task types)

Approach / Research Strategy

Analysis of protocols of task-based learner interactions with a focus on

→ quantity = amount of speech units produced

→ quality = the strategies learners use in interaction to make themselves understood

The argument / assumptions / findings of SLA research

- Input obtained through interaction is more conducive to SLA than input received in other ways
- ‘Comprehensible input’ (Krashen 1981, 1996)
 - through simplification & context
- ‘Negotiation of meaning’ (Long 1983, 2007)
 - through comprehension checks, clarification & confirmation requests
- ‘Comprehensible output’ (Swain 1985, 2005)
 - through reformulations, paraphrase ...
- Interactional adjustments connect input, selective attention, and output = you need to also process language syntactically (focus on form) not just semantically.
(Eckerth TESOL 2008)

→ see research examples of learner protocols in handout

Results

1. SLA research assumes that certain types of cognitive processes or outcomes assist or indeed are central to SLA (e.g. awareness raising, focus on form)
2. Establish empirically that certain kinds of learning tasks enable or indeed require the activation of those cognitive processes (e.g. information-gap, pair-work)
3. Conclude that such tasks and / or types of interaction are to be recommended for language teaching practice (Eckerth TESOL 2008)

Developments

Tasks “are carried out by individuals with different dispositions in different settings. What individual learners do when confronted by task X is likely to be co-determined by a host of other variables. In other words, tasks, patterns of interaction, cognitive processes, and learning outcomes may not be *directly* related. We may therefore conclude that a generic understanding of task-based interaction and learning should be complemented by an inquiry into local settings, curricular purposes, and individual dispositions”.

Implications for L2 research

- L 2 classroom interaction is a cognitive activity, but also a communicative event and a social process
- Tasks are not just carried out, but interpreted and adapted
- Integrating learners’ perceptions in SLA research (Eckerth TESOL 2008)

(2) Practitioner (case-study) research

“A process in which teachers examine their own educational practice systematically and carefully, using a range of data collection and analysis techniques.”

(Karen Johnson, TESOL 2008)

The mindset of a researching practitioner:

- openmindedness (seeking alternatives)
 - responsibility (recognizing consequences)
 - wholeheartedness (continual self-examination).
- (Dewey 1933)

(3) Where are we now? The ‘perceptual gap’

“Because psycholinguistically-oriented studies seek universal items in TBLT by reducing complexity and therefore have the tendency to treat learners as information processing units and tasks as something that take place in a vacuum (see Samuda, 2001:119), they provide no models that can be adapted to my own research conditions. Obviously, I need to accept my learners as historically situated active agents. What I am interested in is not *the acquisition of linguistic forms* through task-based lessons *in general terms*, but *the development of one particular class* under the condition of task-based lessons. Tasks are seen as a ‘*resource for participation*’ (Zuengler & Miller, 2006:36) rather than *input for language learning*” (Schart 2008: 43).

“Everyday life at school was not about research. Research is controlling the variables; teaching is being controlled by them. At my workplace no factors could be isolated. On the contrary, they were hopelessly muddled. Research was about keeping things separate. Life meant everything at once. Research was about being pure. Life was about being eclectic. Research was about being rigorous and consistent. Life was about survival by any available means.” (Appel: 1995, xi)

“(E)s gibt kein einziges Lehrverhalten, für das unzweifelhaft nachgewiesen ist, daß es für alle Lernenden und in allen Situationen günstige Effekte hat.“ (Krumm 1994)

3.1 Academic LAQ research

- No marginalization of the teachers' role
- Teacher as
 - task designer
 - task evaluator
 - expert in ESL & ELF communication (anticipate mutual misunderstanding, develop intercultural awareness, apply interactional strategies)
- Learner as
 - task taker AND task maker
(teacher to involve students in task design, discuss task completion product- and process-oriented, leave them on their own)
 (Eckerth TESOL 2008)

3.2 Practitioner (case-study) research

- FUN (Forschungs- und Nachwuchskolleg Aufgabenforschung, Universities of Education, Freiburg & Heidelberg)
- Kris Van den Branden (2006): Centre for Language and Education at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven
- Michael Schart (2008): Action research study of a beginning German class at a Japanese university