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## **What do we know about how foreign languages are learned? – A pedagogical perspective on tasks**

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About myself: Concerned with understanding teaching and learning, first as a teacher, teacher educator, professor at a university of education

In the attempt to understand FL learning two perspectives on *task* (Lernaufgabe) have been taken: academic LAQ research (1) and practitioner research (2). *Task* (best translated as Lernaufgabe) has been used as a tool by both sides

- (1) to research / identify the features that are likely to support learning
- (2) 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?

*What is its focus, its approach and what are the results?*

- (2) What can teachers learn from practitioner (case-study-based) research?

*that is: from teacher's critical examination of their own practice; I will use a task example from my own classroom research, answering the same questions as in (1):  
What is its focus, its approach and what are the results?*

- (3) Where are we now?

*On positive developments in LAQ research but nonetheless on basic different perspectives between practitioner and academic researchers on tasks that Schart (2008: 42) called “perceptual gap” – and what we can learn from both.*

### **(1) What can teachers learn from (academic) LAQ research?**

*What is its focus, its approach and what are the results?*

*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 (in the past often produced with adult learners under laboratory conditions, now more and more in classrooms) with a focus on

→ quantity = amount of speech units produced

→ quality = the strategies learners use in interaction to make themselves understood (i.e. the frequencies of interactional adjustments [negotiated and modified input = what speakers do in conversation in order to be able *to understand each other*; see *comprehensible input* below]).

The argument / assumptions (findings?) of SLA research are that (see summary in Eckert 2008, TESOL, OHT 5):

- Input obtained through interaction is more conducive to SLA than input received in other ways (*development see next bullet point*)
- ‘Comprehensible input’ (Krashen 1981, 1996)
  - through simplification & context (i.e. scripted texts)
- ‘Negotiation of meaning’ (Long 1983, 2007)
  - through comprehension checks, clarification & confirmation requests
- ‘Comprehensible output’ (Swain 1985, 2005) (*learners need to actively experiment with language to test their assumptions about how language works / find out if they actually communicated what they wanted to say*)
  - through reformulations, paraphrase ...
- Interactional adjustments connect input, selective attention, and output = you need to also process language syntactically (focus on form) not just semantically.

Research used to focus on protocol analysis but now some LAQ researchers see the need to conduct research in classrooms and integrate the learners’ perspectives (by way of post-task-interviews, for example) to avoid misinterpretations /-understandings of learner language / output. Like for example Eckert (use 2 examples from TESOL 2008:

1 OHTs 14 & 15: Researcher thought that this was a clarification request but interview revealed that he was just holding his turn;

2 OHTs 16 & 17

### *Results*

(see Eckert TESOL 2008, F 11):

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

*See Andreas’ and my summary of this research on task features who tried to find out in what way the task structure affects language processing ( i.e. required or optional information exchange, one-way / two-way tasks; open – closed tasks etc.).*

### *Developments*

Meanwhile some LAQ researchers are beginning to question their assumptions and the appropriateness of their research approach, like for example Eckert (see Eckert TESOL 2008, F 12) who concluded at this year’s TESOL conference: “A task is always more or less adequate for a certain group of learners. 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”. In other words: tasks have a universal potential but the outcome always depends on the context!

Therefore: Eckerth’s implications for L2 research (TESOL 2008, F. 18):

- 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

*Überleitung:* It is up to you to decide if you find these findings helpful to inform your teaching. What I think when reading LAQ studies is that findings may be informative for some teachers (those obsessed with grammar or the ‘get it right from the beginning’-type) but may not exactly come as much of a surprise for teachers whose professional idea of self has always been informed by what may roughly be described as learner- and real-life-communication oriented teachers. Their perspective on learning is a restricted perspective on language learning which is why Schart, for example, says what we need is more practitioner research: “because of their restricted perspective, these results are not really helpful in finding an adequate answer (... for) a concrete social setting. (...W)e need more empirical research that involves itself with the complexities of day-to-day classroom practice. This research should be (...) conducted with stakeholders or by the stakeholders themselves.” (Schart 2008: 42).

## **(2) What can teachers learn from practitioner (case-study-based) research?**

*that is: from teacher’s critical examination of their own practice; I will use a task example from my own research, answering the same questions as in (1): What is its focus, its approach and what are the results?*

I did not have the terminology then – to call the following example from an investigation into my own teaching practice as RS teacher in grade 7 research. It was not rigorous in any way, it was not really, as Karen Johnson (TESOL 2008) defines PR “A process in which teachers examine their own educational practice systematically and carefully, using a range of data collection and analysis techniques.” but I think what I had at the time was the mindset of a researching practitioner which Karen Johnson (TESOL 2008), referring to Dewey (1933) said was

- opendmindedness (seeking alternatives)
- responsibility (recognizing consequences)
- wholeheartedness (continual self-examination).

I will use the example to demonstrate two things:

- 1 Task features that have the potential to generally support learner commitment to engage with a task
- 2 The context-relatedness of any task: that this task worked with my learners the way it did (as demonstrated by learner texts, [siehe MSD 2007](#)) depended on some distinctive features of my teaching / learning context and where I was in my professional development at the time (in Schart’s words: “Using crisis as opportunity”, 2008: 49): Completely unhappy with my course-book based teaching *present example*, had only just heard about the wonders of CLT

against which my teaching appeared to be so poor and was experimenting with the ideas, that is: trying to use activities that would allow my learners *to do* something with language that they (and me) thought was relevant and meaningful to them, working at a school where I had to use the course-book – not ‘just because it had been paid for by the community but because my colleagues (and parents, then) equated *teaching the textbook with quality of learning*; but both my learners (and their parents) appreciated my concern and effort to make English relevant and meaningful to them so that re-writing my course-book the way I did was quite revolutionary (I know I would have to come up with Web 2 things and the like these days ...).

→ Task Example: Life in my Street to identify task features that have the potential to motivate learners “to invest mental energy in task completion” (Van den Branden 2006: 175).

### (3) Where are we now? Two different perspectives on task

Even though there are positive developments in LAQ research there is no denying it: there are different perspectives between practitioner and academic researchers on tasks that Schart (2008: 42) called 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).

Because ...

“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).

But what can we learn from recent developments / findings in both?

### 3.1 Academic LAQ research

Eckerth (TESOL 2008, F 19) concluded his talk saying that for him (LAQ researcher) the implications for L2 pedagogy are as follows:

- 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)

... I am not quite sure what we could learn about task design and teacher and learner roles that we did not know before. Therefore I would like to conclude by some recent findings that *practitioner research* has contributed to understand language learning.

#### *Three examples for classroom-based studies*

- FUN (Forschungs- und Nachwuchskolleg Aufgabenforschung, Universities of Education, Freiburg & Heidelberg)
- Kris Van den Branden (2006): Has been leading a research team at the Centre for Language and Education at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (approx. 10 years) to implement and evaluate TBLT at approx. 1,200 state schools and other educational settings (adult vocational training, classes for immigrant children, primary and secondary mainstream education) throughout the Flemish-speaking region of Belgium (Dutch/Flemish as a second language and international Dutch as a foreign language).
- Michael Schart (2008): reports on a one year action research study of a beginning German class at a Japanese university that he teaches to understand his actions and to improve the course curriculum which demonstrates in particular that his own behaviour as a teacher influenced the students' perception of the tasks.

#### Questions they ask (Van den Branden 2006: ½):

*Does TBLT work for teachers and learners in the classroom?*

*Is TBLT more than a fascinating pedagogical approach that looks good and convincing on paper?*

*Can it inspire language teachers when they prepare their lessons or does it only frighten them because of the high demands it places on them and their learners?*

*Is TBLT compatible with prevailing classroom practices, with teachers' and learners' subjective beliefs of what makes good language education?*

#### *Results – some findings*

A task that is *appropriate* does not only need to have certain features / a certain structure but depends on

- *the learners*

Is the *content* of a task we choose meaningful for my learners and what can we do to make it meaningful? Does my task have the potential to motivate my learners into meaningful action and to elicit the kind of cognitive and interactional processes assumed to enhance language learning?

Learners themselves decide to what extent they will actually engage with the task and perceive it as meaningful (p. 177); but the effect of a task depends on the intensity with which the learner approaches them (see Breen's distinction between a survival / achievement orientation, 1987).

- *the teacher*

Boeckmann (2006 in Schart 2008: 44 x): He illustrates how the students' behaviour changes suddenly if the conditions vary, in particular if another teacher takes his or her place in front of the class. He clarifies the pivotal role the teacher plays in the evolution of a learning culture (the Japanese learning culture must be understood as a heterogeneous construct, *rooted in each classroom* rather than historical or religious circumstances).

Van den Branden (2006): It is up to the teacher to bring the task alive and to ensure that learners set a goal for themselves that motivates them to engage in an achievement orientation and in meaningful interaction for this is what will promote their language development in the short and in the long term (p. 178). In supporting task performance teachers should stimulate students to solve problems instead of solving problems themselves (p. 194).

Teachers show a tendency to raise the complexity of the task by imposing additional performance demands (overemphasizing linguistic correctness) (p. 194).

Teachers need to develop a learner-centred attitude (see p. 195).

### *Conclusion*

From a research perspective we need a new definition of what counts as valid research (triangulation, communicative validation). In research whose purpose it is to understand learning, progress is not achieved by claiming to produce generalisable results. It is about "the question of how the results can be employed in other settings (...). Therefore, anyone seeking to transfer findings to another setting must determine whether the presentation of those findings provides sufficient information to enable this" (Schart 2008: 46/47).

We need more CAR research that describe the way that teachers handle tasks in the classroom for we know that teachers play a crucial role in exploiting the vast learning potential of the tasks in question (Van den Branden 2006: 196). Because:

It assumes that.

- teachers work best on problems they have identified for themselves
- teachers become more effective when encouraged to examine and assess their own work and then consider was of working differently
- teachers help each other by working collaboratively
- working with colleagues helps teachers renew their professional knowledge / lives."<sup>1</sup> But

"(...) there is one big problem with action research: there is too little of it. (...) Although it is undoubtedly a noble idea, it just does not seem to work in practice. (...) Published studies of action research in applied linguistics are small in number and as far as my personal experience is concerned, I am still to meet a teacher who has been voluntarily involved in an action research project" (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 191)

<sup>1</sup> Karen Johnson (TESOL April 2008) defined Practitioner Research as "a process in which teachers examine their own educational practice systematically and carefully, using a range of data collection and analysis techniques".

Because: ‘it depends’ structure of teacher knowledge not  $Y \rightarrow Z$

Johnson (1999) überschreibt das erste Kapitel ihres Buches, in dem sie sich mit der Wissensbasis der Lehrerbildung auseinandersetzt, mit der Standardantwort, die sie auf Fragen der Lehrer/innen, mit denen sie arbeitet, parat hat, *It depends*:

“They ask, ‘Should we teach grammar rules explicitly?’ And I respond, ‘It depends. Who are your students and what do you expect them to be able to do with explicit knowledge of grammar rules?’ (...) Asking teachers to think about teaching in this way supports the kind of reasoning that will enable them not only to recognize that it depends, but to articulate what it depends on, enabling them to expand their knowledge of their professional landscapes and use that knowledge flexibly in different contexts and for different purposes and, in turn, offer both ‘real’ (...) and effective classroom practice.” (Johnson 1999, 1-2)

At the end of the day it is about different epistemological perspectives on life: Do we believe that there is a truth out there that is only waiting to be discovered or do we believe that there is no such truth but that ‘truth’ is socially constructed by the people who collaborate and share their lives in a particular social setting and who struggle daily to understand - by respectfully engaging in dialogue with the members of these communities and by acknowledging their potential. I think it has probably become clear to which view I subscribe to.

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