Student use of the mother tongue in the task-based classroom

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This article draws on an interview study with teachers and teacher educators on the topic of the feasibility of task-based teaching for implementation in schools. It focuses on a single theme from the study: student use of the mother tongue. A number of dimensions are addressed: the extent of classroom interaction in English in the context under review; informants' perspectives on mother tongue use; strategies for encouraging use of the target language; and relevant implications for teaching methodology. The conclusion calls for a balanced and flexible view of student use of the mother tongue. Some avenues for further exploration are also sketched, in particular the need to investigate the relationship between task-types and mother tongue use.

Introduction

Task-based approaches seem well-suited for young adult learners, particularly those studying in ESL contexts. In such settings, a task-based approach may represent an opportunity for students to re-activate previously taught structures and refine language output. The suitability of task-based teaching for schools seems less clear-cut.

Hong Kong was an early adopter of task-based approaches in schools with implementation at the primary level beginning in the mid-1990s and continuing to date in both primary and secondary schools. This paper, drawing on data collected in Hong Kong, examines an important issue in the implementation of task-based approaches, namely student use of the mother tongue (MT). This is a perennial challenge in the school foreign language classroom, worth revisiting in the context of task-based teaching.

MT use has potentially both positive and negative consequences. The MT may usefully serve social and cognitive functions, including the construction of scaffolded assistance and create through collaborative dialogue the opportunity for language acquisition to take place (Anton and DiCamilla 1998; Swain and Lapkin 2000). Holliday (1994) argues that students working in groups or pairs do not have to speak English all the time; they can speak in their MT about a text and if through this process they are producing hypotheses about the language, then what they are doing is communicative. Use of MT also relates to learner identity, for example Lin (2000) explores how the L1 enables students in postcolonial Hong Kong to resist the symbolic dominance of English and to communicate shared cultural values.

In terms of negative impacts of MT use, too much reliance on the L1 may undermine the psycholinguistic rationale for task-based interaction as stretching student interlanguage through the process of engaging in a communicative task (Skehan 1998). Such a rationale is obviously predicated on students actually using the target language (TL). A further pragmatic concern is that teachers often feel uncomfortable or somewhat guilty when students are using the MT. In some ways, this discomfort is natural; the teacher's mandate is to improve students' English language and how does this occur if students are conversing in the MT? This tension may be one of the factors contributing to wider concerns about the feasibility of task-based approaches for schooling (for example, Bruton 2005). If tasks lead to a lot of MT use, teachers may query their viability as language teaching methods (Carless 2002).

The data for this article come from an interview study, which sought to provide perspectives on the feasibility of task-based teaching for schooling. Its main focus was on identifying and analysing key challenges facing successful implementation of task-based approaches in Hong Kong secondary schools. Ten teachers were interviewed in order to provide a direct viewpoint from the classroom. Ten teacher educators were also interviewed to provide wider perspectives based on their experience of working with and observing in classrooms, both pre-service and in-service teachers. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as a research method in order to permit informants to express in their own words their views about school implementation of task-based teaching. Interviews lasted from around 45 minutes to one and a half hours, were transcribed and analysed inductively in order to identify themes and emerging insights. Whilst a limitation of the study is its lack of direct classroom observation data, a number of interesting points were raised by informants.

MT use was one of the particular issues raised by both teachers and teacher educators. Use of L1 was identified by informants as a key challenge in the school task-based language classroom. The remainder of the paper organizes findings under four main themes derived from the interview data: classroom interaction; perspectives on MT use; strategies for encouraging use of the TL; and relevant implications for teaching methodology. Each of these sections contains comments from teachers and teacher educators for the purpose of adding insight on an issue relevant to numerous EFL contexts.

Classroom interaction in the TL

Student use of MT needs to be placed within the general context of school foreign language interaction patterns where it is often difficult to motivate adolescents to produce sustained L2 utterances. In the Hong Kong setting, an unwillingness to speak in English may arise from a number of factors (Tsui 1996): lack of confidence or fear of making mistakes; limited opportunities, particularly in large teacher-centred classes; or peer pressure and resistance to speaking in a foreign tongue.

Most teachers and teacher educators in the study indicated that Hong Kong secondary school language classrooms relied heavily on teacher input with teachers driving the lesson and doing most of the talking. Several teacher informants reported students' responses as being minimal and often

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consisting of short one or two word answers. A teacher identified the difficulty of generating interaction during whole-class teaching as follows:

> I don't think there is any genuine interaction in English between teachers and students. When the students put up their hands, they will speak in Cantonese, if you force them to use English then no-one will speak. It is very strange and weird to speak in English when everyone can speak in Chinese.

As teachers reported difficulties in stimulating English language interaction through whole-class teaching, a worthwhile strategy might be to promote group work. Group work seeks to create a more congenial atmosphere for communication and affords students time to prepare utterances. In the following quotation however, a teacher educator observes that group work was also not particularly successful in promoting English interaction:

> I haven't often seen groups interacting in the second language for long periods doing a larger type of task in English which is oriented towards output. Most of the classes I have seen, there is a lot of non-lesson interaction going on in Cantonese in the groups.

Such a quotation may be taken as illustrative of a general difficulty in getting students to use the TL. Lack of interaction in English during group work seems to represent a challenge to the notion of task-based instruction promoting the development of learners' interlanguage. Affective factors are clearly salient and if the task-based classroom contributes to the development of a greater student confidence and motivation, then increased TL could be a positive by-product.

Perspectives on mother tongue use

Most of the informants took a pragmatic view of MT use, considering it to be inevitable. Teacher informants generally expressed a preference for TL use but acknowledged that in order to maintain students' attention, interest or involvement, contributions in the MT needed to be permitted. They also stated that the MT allowed students to express meaning, identity, or humour. Only teachers from schools with higher academic standards reported that students were able to communicate through English on a regular basis.

One teacher educator summed up the tensions as follows:

> I don't have a problem with student use of the MT but I do think there are dangers of overuse, because the whole point of the class is for learners to be practising their English.

Another teacher educator voiced teachers' frustrations when carrying out communicative activities:

> Teachers feel frustrated that they can't monitor performance on the use of language adequately. It seems that they are helpless in monitoring mother tongue usage.

These comments are illustrative of some of the negative emotions that teachers may experience if a task is being done in the MT. I speculate that

this may even prompt teachers to revert to more whole-class teaching and so reduce their implementation of interactive tasks.

Both teachers and teacher educators suggested that a key issue was student ability and with higher achieving learners, teachers should not permit 'too much L1'. My interpretation is that appraising what is a reasonable amount rather than too much MT use represents a difficult teacher judgement. One teacher educator suggested a guiding principle: 'If the L1 is supporting L2 learning then I would support MT use'. The issue of exactly how L1 might support L2 development was, however, not addressed by respondents in much detail. Another teacher educator did report a strategy involving materials and guiding questions in the TL, students mainly conversing in MT but after discussion, converting (with teacher support) some of the ideas into an oral or written report in the TL. Within such strategies, teacher informants mentioned difficulties in managing large classes in view of the labour-intensiveness of the scaffolding required to convert ideas into the TL.

Strategies to encourage TL use

Teachers reported a number of strategies that they adopted to try to encourage students to use the TL. Two representative comments from teachers:

> It can be difficult to stop them using MT. I try to force them through walking around and reminding them. When I stand next to them they use English but when I move away they go back to Cantonese. When they have to do discussions, they may lack vocabulary.

> If the task is difficult and they don't know all the expressions, they may use Cantonese. We encourage them not to be nervous in speaking English and to try to use English. It depends on the groups, some are quite enthusiastic in speaking English and some are quite reluctant.

A teacher educator reported two strategies to encourage TL production based on her own school experiences. The first involved appointing 'language monitors', individual students whose role was to try to remind their classmates to use English. She believed that an advantage of such a system was that it entrusted some responsibility to students. This strategy could be extended through the notion of a 'mother tongue scribe' (Deller and Rinvolucri 2002) who notes down what has been said in MT with this facilitating follow-up activities, such as translating MT utterances into the TL. The second reported strategy involved incentives, such as a reward system through which students could be given stickers, stamps, or be involved in group competitions to show appreciation of TL use. A different teacher educator mentioned a third strategy, placing recording devices next to groups to motivate the students or facilitate checking group use of TL.

Another teacher educator proposed a more radical way of tackling the problem:

> Regression to Cantonese is a huge problem, so much so that I wonder if whole-class and pair tasks might be more favourable than group tasks . . . In a whole-class task, the teacher can draw on students to come up and give their output, so instead of the teacher visiting the students during group work, the students are visiting the front of the classroom.

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This teacher educator prefers to mitigate the problem through task design, for example, the teacher orchestrating student contributions in the TL within whole-class teaching. It seems to me that the drawback to this suggestion is that such modes of interaction may not adequately deal with issues such as student reticence and unwillingness to speak in the TL during whole-class interaction.

Implications for teaching methodology

Obviously the way the teacher presents material, structures learning experiences and the kind of activities carried out in class impact on the extent to which students are likely to use the TL or MT. It is worth reiterating that task-based approaches require a skilful, flexible, and knowledgeable practitioner (Skehan: op. cit.) and involve a more complex teacher role than in traditional Presentation–Practice–Production methods.

Teacher educators pointed to tensions between task design and the likelihood of MT use:

> In contextualized practice, control comes from the fairly detailed situation, the structure of the task. In the pure task it is much freer, so if it is free in term of communicating meanings, it is going to be free in terms of the languages they might use. Some sort of incentive needs to be built into the task to keep it in English or through how the task is structured.

This comment raises the doubt that the free communication of meaning, in other words what makes the activity a task rather than communicative practice, can lead to greater use of MT. A second interview extract is in similar vein:

> A thing that is crucial is the wonderful paradox that if the task is a good task, students do it in Cantonese. So when the learners share an L1, you have to build into the methodology, ways of persuading the learners not to use MT. Learners have to recognize the futility of using Cantonese earlier, because it doesn't create conditions for the post-task to work.

This teacher educator highlights that the more absorbing the task, the greater is the risk of student use of MT. He also alludes to the post-task which encourages attention to grammatical form, in particular those forms that proved problematic to learners when they performed the task. For students to benefit from the post-task language work, this informant indicates that the students need to realize that the task has to be done in the TL. My experience suggests that whether adolescent students are likely to be persuaded by this remains a moot point.

Another informant suggested that task repetition (Bygate 2001) might be a strategy to promote increased use of the TL:

> Maybe a lot of tasks can be rehearsed in the MT first. Martin Bygate's work on task repetition might be relevant here. So maybe the first time around 50% Cantonese and 50% English; then 75% English; then the third time 100% English.

This seems like a useful strategy, particularly if student interest can be maintained over repetitions of the task. Relevant issues might include: different goals for successive iterations of the task for example, fluency, accuracy, complexity; recycling language in different contexts and with

additional language being introduced (Chan 2006); and careful timing of task repetition, for example, as an end of unit consolidation.

Another teacher educator suggested that a priority was further professional development for teachers on how to carry out some of the elements of task-based teaching. She reported observing students being put into groups and told to discuss without sufficient input about goals, requirements, and the language to be used. In other words, it is essential for students to be thoroughly prepared linguistically for the implementation of a task, an obvious point but sometimes not fully achieved under pressures of time, lesson pacing, and classroom management considerations. One effective way of facilitating TL use during tasks is for teachers to ensure that not only have students been exposed to relevant language but are able to produce it in independent communication. For example, visual display of relevant material could help students access the vocabulary and structures required for the task. Recent empirical research indicates that how teachers managed visual support was one of the qualitative differences between more effective and less effective task-based teaching with young learners (Chan ibid.).

The need for further methodological thought on MT use in task-based teaching is brought out by another teacher educator:

> I don't think the state of the art of methodology has yet reached the point where people can reliably create tasks which have the element of control to get students interacting in what is not the natural language for them to be using.

Overall, this section resonates with a concern raised by Seedhouse (1999) that in task-based interaction, there is a danger that students complete the task but make sub-optimal use of the TL.

Conclusion

In sum, the interview data from the study illustrate something of the complexity of the issue of MT use in the task-based classroom. The challenges of stimulating and maintaining interaction in the MT and some strategies for encouraging TL use have been discussed. Use of the MT does seem to be a humanistic and learner-centred strategy, with potential to support student learning, but at the same time involving a risk of failing to encourage TL practice and communication. There is clearly a need for a balanced and flexible view of MT use in the task-based classroom.

It would be useful if teacher educators could provide more concrete guidance to teachers as to when student use of the MT may be beneficial. Is it possible, for example, to distinguish between communicative tasks (when TL use is mandatory) and language analysis tasks where the use of MT is accepted or even encouraged? Are there certain types of task when engaging with TL material through the MT is recommended? For example, consciousness-raising tasks (for example, Mohamed 2004) seek to raise student awareness of the formal properties of a language feature. In such cases, the L1 may help students to formulate hypotheses about language and support them in developing explicit understandings about how grammar operates in the TL. Similarly, Deller and Rinvolucri (op. cit.) suggest that students can profitably use MT to make comparisons between the grammars of their first and second languages.

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As indicated by the data reported here, task design and the associated teaching methodology also require careful consideration if tasks are to promote sustained TL use. Factors such as task complexity and task difficulty (Robinson 2001) clearly impact on student language production. Unfamiliarity with the topic, lack of planning time, or cognitive complexity may trigger MT use. Given these challenges, school age students may best be served by tasks which are fairly tightly structured so that TL output can be scaffolded. One option in this vein would be focused tasks (Ellis 2003) where learners are induced to use a particular linguistic feature in the task. The data reported in this paper do suggest that the more ambitious or open-ended the task, the more likelihood of MT use. Requiring further research is the interplay between different task types and MT use. Are there variations in extent and type of MT use stimulated by information gap, opinion gap, or decision-making tasks? Might a role-play task encourage maintenance of TL if students are able to immerse themselves in a particular character?

Another issue is that task-based teaching need not focus predominantly on oral tasks and other modes can also be exploited. For example, jigsaw reading tasks (when students read different parts of a text or receive different input on the same topic) create an information gap and may provide suitable input through the texts to encourage use of the TL, whilst also permitting negotiation of meaning through the MT. Written tasks in pairs or small groups may be useful in promoting both collaborative dialogue in the MT and the creation of text in the TL (Swain and Lapkin: op. cit.). Computer-mediated communication may also be a further way of enhancing interaction through the TL.

In conclusion, there remains a need for more recognition, reporting, and theorizing of how MT can be a positive resource in the task-based classroom. Under what particular circumstances and how does the MT support L2 acquisition? What are the cognitive functions that are stimulated by MT use? In particular, we need more empirical data from school classrooms which illustrate constructive use of the MT and how it might contribute to TL development. Seedhouse's (op. cit.) call for more transcripts and analyses of task-based interaction still seems to be valid, particularly if from EFL school contexts in which code-switching between TL and MT is a central part of task enactment processes.

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