The Re-examination of Planning for Task-Based Activities in Second Language Teaching

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to re-examine planning for task-based activities in second language teaching, and to suggest a new scale of accuracy for L2 (language 2) learners. Studies that suggest distinguishing errors and mistakes have been popular in Japan, but there have been mixed results of accuracy research in second language acquisition. To make it clear, we conducted two experiments regarding task based activities. From the results, we noticed that L2 learners studying English should be able to measure their own accuracy based on a new proposal. In conducting our analysis, we can employ the new scale of accuracy.

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to suggest the degree of accuracy for Japanese speakers who have been studying English as a foreign language. In recent years, task-based activities have been popular in the classroom in Japan. These activities require students to perform output tasks, such as speaking and writing in the target language. Previous literature often holds that planning time is one of the significant factors that may influence students' output performance. In this study, two questions will be posed. First, what is planning time? How is it applied in the classroom? Second, why is it important from the theological and pedagogical aspects of language learning? What effectiveness does it have upon both student's accuracy and fluency? We will pursue answers to these crucial questions in order to contribute to the development of more effective L2 (second language) learning method.

1. Recent studies of planning

To carry out a series of tasks in the present experiments, various types of planning were reviewed here. First, we looked at the following two points: The nature of planning and the nature of errors which are distinct from mistakes, since these points have recently been recognized in the field of language education.

The definition of planning type

To understand the nature of planning, many types of planning must be taken into account. Ellis (2005) indicated that planning can be divided into two types: pre-task planning and within-task planning. In pre-task planning, the students have an opportunity to plan what to say and how to write it out before their performance (e.g. using a dictionary, studying a model of a performance, seeking hints from textbooks). In contrast, within-task planning is a typical form used by students in a classroom. Ellis argues that "this can be achieved most easily by manipulating the time made available to the students for the on-line planning of what to say/write in a task performance" (2005: 3).

Reference to within-task planning

It has been recognized that there are many types of planning in within-task planning. Ellis (2005: 4) suggests that within-planning time can be classified into two groups: pressured planning and unpressured planning. In the former, students are expected to produce a task rapidly in task-based activities such as engaging in conversations and asking or answering the teacher's questions; you will have to talk about something or ask some questions in front of other participants with a time limit during the activity (Ellis 2005: 4). Later, they are given unpressured planning time when

it is not necessary for them to provide their answers in a given exercise (Ellis 2005: 4).

The merits of within-task planning in a classroom are two-fold. Firstly, it will help students perform their tasks more accurately and fluently. Recent researchers (e.g., Pauline and Peter 1996) have shown that planning enables learners to become more fluent in a foreign language than non-planning learners (cited in Robinson: 311); they will perform better if learners have a chance to plan a task beforehand. It has also been found that planning learners are more capable of producing more complex sentences. Secondly, within-task planning helps avoid distraction by other students when they are not asked by their teacher to do a particular task during the class. Their results show that students fail to sustain their concentration when they are given no planning time; clearly, when not called on by a teacher, they tend not to take his/her question seriously. However, allowing planning time involves all participants thinking hard about a given question as they are expected to, for no one knows which students will be asked by the teacher to answer the question until later.

Error analysis

It is essential to distinguish errors and mistakes. Many researches define errors as those unconsciously produced by learners. In other word, Errors are not incorporated into the correct language system, like mistakes. Ellis (1997: 58) explains two types of mistakes: "those that result from processing problems of various kinds, and those that result from such strategies as circumlocution and paraphrase, which a student uses to overcome lack of knowledge". Moreover, in analyzing errors in second language acquisition, we must draw attention to another notion: overgeneralization in second language learning. The over-monitored use of grammatical knowledge sometimes makes L2 learners overgeneralize one rule and apply it to the other cases, thereby constructing incorrect sentences. Richards (1971: 183) listed such typical errors in English as a second language as follows:

*We can *took* him out.

*She cannot *to* go.

Richards also suggests that "children learning English as a mother tongue will produce forms like *comed* and *goed* by analogy with past tense formation in regular verbs" (1974: 12).

The point I wish to emphasize here is that mistakes are often be made even by children learning English as their mother tongue and not just L2 learners. Then, we may safely say that these mistakes are made accidentally owing to the slip of the tongue, fatigue, anxiety, the lack of concentration, etc. We should see them as a positive factor to encourage the learners and improve their proficiency, not as a problem to be identified and corrected instantly only for measurement purposes or evaluation.

Mixed recent studies of L2 learner's accuracy

There have been mixed results of accuracy research in second language acquisition. According to Fitzpatrick (2003), even if learners are given any amount of time to plan to write, errors may not disappear. In this study, the examinee, a 35 year-old Japanese woman who lived in America for 8 years, wrote articles on a step by step basis from 1st draft to 3rd draft. As a result, her errors decreased as she proceeded to the following draft while also producing new errors; her accuracy was not increased in spite of the planning time. As Fitzpatrick (2003: 96) explained, the student's accuracy did not increased even if he/she was given any amount of planning time. Another important point to note here is that the results of recent studies about accuracy with task-based activities are mixed. Wendel (1997) found that planning might have no effects on accuracy but enable learners to use more complex grammatical structure (cited in Ellis 2003) Thus, we will need to seek a better understanding of what accuracy means to L2 learners in reference to mistakes vs.errors.

2. Experiments

This study deals with the correlation between the degree of planning time and student's accuracy and fluency. In fact, many researchers agree with this assumption, indicating that students become more and more capable of output tasks in accordance with the degree of planning time, although it is still not clear that student's accuracy can be proportionately enhanced. I would like to focus on accuracy in task-based activities.

Methodology

38 native Japanese speakers who are 7th grade students participated in this experiment. They have lived in Japan and were at the early stages of studying English as a foreign language. There were two different sets of data collected from the two different groups concerning two key questions in a speaking task as below:

Question 1: Where are you from?
Question 2: What can he play?

Analysis

The students were divided into 2 groups, based on their responses (**Group A** and **Group B**). Group A gave the answer fluently, but Group B could not answer as fluently even if they produced correct answers at length, or they sometimes made some mistakes:

*I from Japan.
*You are Japan.

We conducted both a written test and spoken test for this question. The former was

practiced at the beginning of the class to see if the students might still remembered how to use the auxiliary verb, which they studied in the previous lesson. Group B was also asked in a speaking task by the teacher. Similarly, Group A gave the answer fluently, but Group B could not respond to it. Note that the same sentences on the writing test were also used in this speaking task. Both groups were given the same question by the same teacher. However, in the oral task Group A was not required to answer without prior notice, while Group B was instructed to answer immediately. Students had already learned the syntactic structures and their meanings of both question types in advance.

It is clear from the results of this experiment that planning can affect student's fluency: Group A can be considered more fluent than Group B based on their answers. In fact, since Group A had the opportunity to plan during the task, they gave the answer fluently. In contrast, Group B students were required to answer right after the teacher asked the question; that is to say, they did not have enough time for planning. Consequently, they could not fluently answer Question 2 in the speaking task, even when they could answer the same question in the writing test.

A further important point to note in this study is that Group A also produced wrong sentences in other special cases. Obviously, their fluency was also affected by the degree of the planning time. However, I found that one student from Group A made a wrong sentence as follows:

Student 1: *He can *plays* tennis.

Although it may be interpreted as the within-task planning, it is considered to be one of the important factors influencing students' fluency, Student 1 produced a wrong sentence without even hesitating. The wrong sentence produced by Student 1 can be viewed as error, not as a mistake as mentioned earlier. In this case, the student producing the wrong sentence was at an advanced level, and she not only had enough time for the within-task planning but also had an opportunity to prepare for the pre-task planning. This can be taken as evidence to show that any type of planning time cannot be the deciding factor in resolving their problems. Then, the question we have to consider here is, what is the accuracy for L2 English learners?

3. The new scale of accuracy for L2 learners

It is necessary to redefine the concept of accuracy. The previous experiments lead us to develop one hypothesis: any amount of planning time does not equal an enhancement of L2 learner's accuracy. If this is true, then planning would be recognized as an unnecessary procedure in tasks. By definition, accuracy means "the state of being accurate; precision or exactness, resulting from care" (The Oxford English Dictionary, 1989). If we follow this reasoning, it never allows us to consider "mistakes" as an accurate course of action that can lead to improvement. Thus, accuracy needs to be considered from the viewpoint of task-based activities.

The purpose of task-based activities

The fact that students are expected not to make any "mistakes" suggests that this can be a big obstacle in the task-based activities. One of the most important goals in classroom tasks is producing the target language. Actually, many people learn a second or foreign language for a variety of purposes. When the learners have task-based activities, they can learn a second language more effectively in such a way as to prepare themselves for English-speaking settings in society. As Van Avermaet and Gysen (2006: 18) describe "If the goals of official language courses are described in terms of the particular language use situations and domains, this may have a positive impact on national and regional policies for language education". Thus, task-based activities are greatly needed to improve student's language proficiency level; producing the target language is the essential goal for the activities. If overly pressured so as not to make mistakes in speaking and writing, many students in the early-stage of second language acquisition will not only be unable to not carry out the output tasks but also may lose the desire to learn the target language. Drawing on some important studies, Nunan (2004: 85) explained what factors make tasks more difficult than others. According to Nunan (2004), if the learners are not highly motivated, have no prior experiences, and

do not have sufficient language skill, it is becomes more and more difficult for them to complete the assigned tasks. For this reason, we need to establish a new scale of accuracy in order to measure the student's task performance more effectively in an attempt to define what elements are important problems and what elements are not in L2 learning classes.

The scale of accuracy based on a new concept

In the preceding section, we noticed that L2 learners studying English should be able to measure their own accuracy based on a new proposal. In conducting our analysis, we can employ the following scale:

level - 4 b	produce more complex sentences without errors and mistakes
level - 4 a	produce more complex sentences with errors or mistakes
level - 3	meet the minimum requirements for the tasks without making errors or mistakes
level - 2	complete the task with errors
level - 1	just produce words
level - 0	no overt responses

Figure.1: Proposal a new scale of accuracy

Recall that, here "accuracy" does not necessarily mean not producing any errors and mistakes. As Nunan (2004) described, "if the learners are not motivated enough, have no prior experiences, and they do not have any language skill, task-based activities cannot fulfill the task's purpose". Moreover, it is highly probable that the students do not say/write anything in the tasks even when they come up with what to say and know how to write it because of the fear of getting it wrong. In order to verify this assumption, I did a survey of 38 students in the 7th grade: some students cannot say a simple sentence in oral tasks, but the answer when written by themselves on a review test in the first task,

show that they know how to pronounce the words. This result confirms our hypothesis that students may not fulfill the output task for the lack of self-confidence or fear of not being "correct", even if they have the ability to do so. Many of the Japanese students learning English as a foreign language find themselves in similar circumstances. With this in mind, I will present a detailed description of **level-1** in Figure.1. Recall that, the purpose of task-based activities is to produce the target language. As such, if learners produce a second language even with some flaws, achieving the purpose of a task, it may be said that learners are making progress in accuracy slowly but steadily by making "mistakes". In short, working toward the goal is always better than doing nothing in output tasks. Thus, **level-1** is described as just producing. In **level-2:** the learners can produce sentences with some mistakes which can be identified as errors. The learners may have errors, which should be interpreted as mistakes. Recall that, as many researches explain, errors are those unconsciously produced by learners. From the standpoint of error analysis, making errors in the early-stage of second language learning should be taken as the norm, not as an aberration or a mistake. In contrast, **level-3** is quite simple: The students meet the minimum requirements for the task without making errors or mistakes. However, there is a significant point to consider here: how should minimum requirements be made or set? As Nunan (2004: 47) notes, data used in experimental tasks can be provided by the teacher, textbooks or other sources. So, the first requirement for students is to learn the given data. Then, they would be required to use what they have acquired in output tasks. They should also be informed that what is being required in these tasks will be needed at later stages of listening, reading, speaking and writing. Finally, at **level-4**: the learners are requested to produce more complex sentences with or without errors or mistakes, for example, using compound structures, and adding more information or modifiers. The students are encouraged to develop a method of self-monitoring within a writing task. Thus, the following approach was employed in this observation:

A total of 12 college students participated in this experiment. All participants whose native language is Japanese were asked to write on the following topic:

Which teachers do you respect in your university?

List 3 teachers and give the reasons.

Participants were not given the topic until just before the task, and they could not use any references such as dictionaries and textbooks. Clearly, in this experiment, they could not have any pre-task planning time.

(Method)

First time: Participants were given 5 minutes to write. They were allowed to use a black pen alone.

Extra time: Participants were given 4 minutes as an extra time after the first 5 minutes. They were allowed to use only a red or blue pen. This time they will not be informed of the time after the first 5 minutes passed.

They were allowed two pens so their writing could not be erased. The idea for this procedure is to make this writing task as close to the real speaking situation as possible. As it turned out, I found that the given extra time, they could/would add new information to their first draft. Again, it is important to note the purpose of task-based activities here: production of the target language. In this case, it was assumed that they would produce more sentences using the within-task planning of the extra time than they did with their first draft. Thus, we may say that accuracy could be improved with more information added to the task; the more within-task planning time may be given, the better the student's performance may be.

In summary, in considering L2 learner's accuracy, it is important that the task-based activities aim to encourage production of the target language. From this point of view, teachers would be best advised to approve student's "mistakes" as learning steps or experiences rather than correcting and measuring them as wrong.

4. Findings

The within-task planning is often used in tasks. Sometimes, the clear indicator for

students appears in the task's planning. In this section, I will consider planning in connection with the clear indications and show what effect they may have on learners' performance.

Within-task planning with clear indicators

Making careful observations of the students in the 7th grade English class, I found that those who cannot complete the tasks could manage to improve their accuracy by exploiting a clear clue which other students provided. The following is such a dialogue between the teacher and the students:

(DIALOGUE)
Teacher (T):   What can he do? Student 1?
Student 1 (S1): (not producing: cannot answer)
Teacher (T):   Ok, Student2?
Student 2 (S2): <u>He</u> can play baseball.
Teacher (T):   He?
Student 2 (S2): She can play baseball.
Teacher (T):   Ok, next. What can he play? Student 1.
Student 1 (S1): He can play soccer.

Here we see that **S1** could answer the question for the second time. The questions we have to ask here are twofold. First, what are clear indicators in the required tasks? Second, do these indicators truly affect student's accuracy and fluency? Given that **S2** played an important role as a clear indicator for **S1**, it may safely be assumed that **S1** can achieve the task by attempting to incorporate **S2**'s answer into his answer; the student's accuracy and fluency increased with the clear indicators.

Difficulties

Clear indicators can help to increase learner's accuracy. However, we encounter difficulties when a student's level of the target language is considered. It is possible that students cannot develop their accuracy in tasks, because he/she cannot use or understand the clear indicators presented. That is to say, if students do not understand anything in the task, including the statements produced by other students, he/she would not be able to perform the task accurately. From this point of view, the issue of student's accuracy is not irrelevant to their level of the target language or the level of the task set up by the teacher as teachers are quite often following a yearly or term plan regardless of the observed level of the students just to finish the "text".

5. Conclusion

So far we have discussed L2 learner's accuracy by looking closely into task-based activities. L2 learner's accuracy can be better understood in terms of the proposed new scale of accuracy. While the results of our experiments, as well as some recent studies clearly demonstrate, more use of the within-task planning can improve student's fluency, though some errors may still remain. It should be noted that although tasks in a L2 classroom are primarily intended to produce the target language, the proposed new scale of accuracy is needed to measure the effectiveness of student's speaking and writing performance, not just how many answers were correct or wrong thereby redefining the whole objectives of tasks in the classroom.

Objections are bound to arise about the redefinition of accuracy. But it seems that the conventional notion of accuracy only evaluates the technical aspects of the students' language performance rather then encouraging them to take more risks and develop their untapped potential through making inevitable mistakes which lead to learning in the natural course of foreign language acquisition.

Thus, the concept of accuracy merits much further research. I would like to explore

further into the purpose of task-based activities as we set out to redefine the concept of accuracy in connection with a more effective method of second language learning.

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