

Research Issues

SOME UN-COMMUNICATIVE ISSUES FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING

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INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

For many years now it has been common for language teachers to teach communicatively. This is a term which has many meanings, but for the present article it refers to classroom activity where learners are using language with a focus on appropriacy and with a fair degree of control over what they choose to say or to attend to. One of the main justifications for communicative activity in classrooms is that it resembles the way in which competent language users engage with language in the 'real world'. Consequently it makes sense for teachers to encourage their learners to use language creatively, and in ways which are appropriate to the context at hand, since these are important goals for language learning.

But while communicative language teaching has a number of justifications in reference to the goals of language learning, it may not provide such a strong basis for the process of language learning, in particular the process of initial language learning. In order to learn new grammatical forms, learners need first to consciously 'notice' them in the language which surrounds them (Schmidt, 1990) - to make sense of them in some way, for example by noticing how the past tense signals past time in a written text. They also need to learn how to put these newly learned forms to use in their own language production - in their own 'output'. Both these processes can be difficult to accomplish when learners are using language communicatively. One reason for this is that communicative discourse (i.e. communicative language use) tends to focus learners' attention onto meaning in a way which makes it difficult to notice forms as forms. A second reason is that many communicative activities require learners to use language in a relatively unprepared way, meaning that they may not have the time to collect their thoughts so that they can access new and possibly quite complex grammatical forms in their language output. A third reason is that even when a learner has sufficient time to collect her thoughts in this way, she may find herself inhibited from taking too many risks with new language for fear of sounding 'foolish' or even incoherent.

I go on to suggest that in order to support initial language learning, we might need to think about a different kind of engagement with language; one which is motivated not by a commu-

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nicative purpose but specifically by a learning purpose. Such a 'learning discourse' needs to be carefully supported through task design and teacher guidance, so that learners have the time, the inclination and the confidence to start engaging with new language.

2. Aspects of the language learning process: Attention and consciousness

First we need to get a better notion of what is meant by 'initial learning'. In language learning, the initial stages of attending to new linguistic forms require conscious attention. This applies in the first instance to 'intake'. Intake is an essential point of 'first contact' with an aspect of the language system which was previously beyond the learners ability to comprehend. Intake is distinguished from 'input', the latter being the language to which the learner is exposed, whether this be in writing or in speaking, whether intentionally or whether by chance. Scholars often point out that 'input' does not necessarily lead to 'intake'. For instance, the teacher might present an aspect of the passive, but this will not be 'noticed' by the learners either because they are simply not at a stage where they can make sense of it, or perhaps because the examples the teacher uses are culturally unfamiliar. In either event the passive is there in the input but learners fail to notice it, and so fail to convert it into intake.

A similar picture applies also in the case of output. Once an aspect of language form has been initially noticed, the learner will need to try it out productively, using it as part of her own output. Again this is a process which is very demanding on cognitive resources: Using a new linguistic form is difficult and cumbersome when the form itself is barely understood, and (like intake) it consequently requires considerable attention. As a result learners are known to avoid using certain grammatical forms because they require a lot of effort, and because they might anyway not be seen as communicatively necessary (see Skehan, 1998).

Yet as teachers we will want to encourage learners to override such inhibitions, by making it as easy as possible to call upon new forms, so that over a period of time simply accessing new language becomes an altogether easier operation. Through practice, cognitive psychologists tell us, new knowledge gets more established or 'automated', so that we can access it more or less automatically and without the need to pay it undue heed - something which is very necessary in view of all the other demands which discourse participants need to keep control over; demands such as being seen to be relevant, being a good listener and so on (see Schmidt, 1992).

3. Communicative difficulties for leaning: transactional discourse

3.1 The complexity of discourse

If our aim is to help learners to intake new forms through noticing them, and to start to deploy them in their own output, then the emphasis needs to be on accessibility - helping learners to gain access to forms which are (for them) still novel, challenging and complex. But this is easier said than done, because once the task gets underway, all kinds of factors (not all of them predictable) impinge. As a result, even though the learner may have every intention of using the task to try out novel forms, she may find that she never gets the chance to do so because she feels forever constrained by what her partner is saying. In other words, her sense of what it is communicatively appropriate to say constrains and inhibits her from ever taking the kind of risks with her own language which would help her learning.

3.2 Transactional discourse: language 'from word to world'

Given such difficulties how do learners ever manage to focus on form at all? For many years now one particular kind of discourse has been promoted as being appropriate for language learning purposes. It is the basis of communicative language use, features prominently in many proposals for communicative language teaching, and underlies both the 'interaction hypothesis' (Long, 1996) and its near pedagogic relative, task-based language teaching (Long and Crookes, 1992), and I will refer to it as 'transactional' discourse.

The most important characteristic of this kind of language use is that it is communicative. Communicative language use is all about using the forms of the language as a 'resource' for the creation of meaning (Widdowson, 1983), and in so doing to act on context so as to change it in some way. For example, when we offer help or make a request, we do so as to elicit an acceptance or an agreement, and in so doing we are using language to get something done (and hence to make a change). To adapt a term coined by the philosopher John Searle (1969), the direction of flow here between language (the world) and context (the world) is 'from word to world', because language is used as a means of acting on the world. Of course this is the kind of communicative orientation which ultimately we will want our learners to act on with some agility. But while it serves us well in designating the goal of language learning, it works less well (as I shall argue shortly) in helping learners to achieve that goal.

Another characteristic of transactional discourse is that it is based on the need for participants to 'share' or to 'negotiate' meanings which are not already part of shared knowledge. Transactional discourses have always been immensely popular in language teaching (most notably through various types of information-gap task), as well as in language learning research (e.g. Brown and Yule 1983; Anderson and Lynch 1988, Yule 1997).

Thirdly, transactional discourse means transacting information in a particular way, using what is sometimes called the 'principle of least effort' (Zipf, 1949; Bolinger, 1972:29). This means that the discourse participant will engage with language selectively, on the basis of a kind of 'need to know' maxim, so that they will not pay more attention to language or say more than is strictly and communicatively necessary given current circumstances. Conversely, the least effort language user will engage more elaborately with language only when there is a clear need, for instance because there are crucial meanings which simply cannot be implied or inferred any other way. In short, the more relevant information I already share with my interlocutor, the less need to engage further with language, and vice versa.

3.3 How transactional discourse can constrain language learning

One can readily understand the popularity of this kind of activity in language teaching, particularly in comparison to the sort of pedagogic activity which preceded it - the stilted, overly controlled language of the structural syllabus. Nonetheless it is limited by its very nature. The basic assumption underlying the promotion of transactional discourse is that language learning somehow emerges out of processes of language use, and that a communicative motivation to convey meaning is adequate for a learning purpose. But as has often been observed, successfully communicating one's meaning can often be achieved without

using language very elaborately at all. As Swain has noted in a much cited article, "simply getting one's meaning across can and does occur with grammatically deviant forms" (1985:248). She goes on to call for a methodology where learners are in some way "pushed towards the delivery of a message that is not only conveyed, but that is conveyed precisely, coherently and appropriately" (ibid.).

Thus we often read in contemporary SLA literature of the need for engineering 'pushed output' (Swain, ibid.) - output, that is, which the learner pushes to the point where she is accessing what for her is complex, risk-taking language.

Another important feature of transactional discourse has to do with attentional capacity. According to the principle of least effort, transactional discourse users ought to reserve much of their conscious attention for clarifying and negotiating necessary meanings which are not already shared. The problem here is that very often, negotiating meaning is such a demanding activity that it leaves little space to attend to new language for intake, or to produce novel grammatical forms in output - and this problem is compounded by the fact that it is new language which typically requires the greatest amount of attentional capacity.

For example, when we begin to elaborate our language to clarify or to seek clarification of a communicative difficulty, we are likely to be addressing problems which are unanticipated, and which only come to light when our interlocutor says (for instance) "sorry, could you say that again?" or simply "huh?". Because this interaction is unanticipated, the learner is going to devote most of her attention simply to dealing with and clarifying the problem to hand, with little if any spare capacity left over to focus on new forms for learning.

Let's imagine that the learner is in the following position: she has said something which involves her in wrongly formulating the irregular past tense form 'went'. Her teacher replies by reformulating and correcting the error, in the following way:

1. Learner: I go there Wednesday
Teacher: You mean you went there, right? Last Wednesday?

In the SLA literature this kind of reformulating - where the error is implicitly corrected while the focus remains on the topic under discussion - is known as a 'recast' (see Mitchell and Myles, 1998: 134-138). Recasts are said to be one of the key ways in which learners can focus on form during task-based interactions (Long and Robinson, 1998).

In part, as already noted, the learner may have her work cut out here simply dealing with the possible misunderstanding, leaving precious little spare attentional capacity to focus on the form and discover that 'went' is the correct version. But there is a related difficulty which runs, perhaps, even deeper. Faced with the teacher's utterance, the communicatively appropriate way to 'hear' this is, first and foremost, to heed it as a request for clarification. But acting on this essentially communicative orientation to language, there is little incentive to notice the past tense as the past tense. Surely what our fictional learner is most likely to do is to interpret and respond to the teacher's utterance communicatively, with an emphasis on the meaning and not on the form per se: 'last Wednesday? Yeah, last Wednesday, that's right!' In other words, a communicative orientation inhibits the learner from attending to language form as form, even though such a language focus might be necessary if new language is to be noticed.

For all these reasons, we have cause to question the suitability of this kind of communicative language use for second language learning.

4. Learning Discourse

4.1 Language for learning or language for using?

At heart the greatest difficulty with transactional discourse is that it is derived from a conception of how competent language users go about their business. It assumes, for instance, that given certain unpredictable difficulties which require negotiation to sort out, the language learner/user has at her disposal a largely sorted and automated mental resource of learned language which can readily come to her aid. No need, in this kind of situation, to worry too much about grammatical complexity or the novelty of certain forms, because these are difficulties already taken care of, leaving her free to attend to the problematic meanings while the language virtually takes care of itself.

But when it comes to the language learner, isn't this putting the cart before the horse? Are we not confusing two very different discourse contexts here? The discourse of competent use (i.e. transactional discourse), and discourse for achieving such a level of competence. The latter, I think, ought to be a very different kind of discourse from the kind we have been considering so far; one in which discourse conditions support the kind of engagements with language required in order to foster intake and output automatizing. In the following two sections I want to examine how such a discourse might be manifested in classrooms, considering first output tasks and then tasks for intake.

4.2 Supporting Output

There are two kinds of task which in recent years have begun to catch the interest of some SLA researchers. One is planning. A number of studies over the past 15 years or so have investigated how the quality of learner language can be very significantly improved if it is preceded by a planning stage; a stage where learners can plan to use specific forms which are selected because they are new and challenging (e.g. Ellis 1987, Foster and Skehan 1986, Ortega 1999). The rationale for planning is that it can enable the learner to 'collect her thoughts' in advance, so that the general cognitive load on attention is diminished. If the learner is involved in telling a story from a series of picture prompts, for instance (as in the study conducted by Ellis, 1987), it might be that the learner will first familiarize herself with the storyline per se, so that she can then work more on getting her grammatical act together, so to speak, by accessing more complex and more accurate forms.

The second, related kind of classroom activity is task repetition. A number of researchers have experimented with the simple device of allowing learners to repeat the same task a second time. Here, too, there is evidence that this can help the learner create more attentional space in order to 'push' her output more effectively the second time around. For example, when Bygate (1996) gave one of his learners the chance to repeat a picture-based story telling task, he noted that the second time around the learner was able to use more complex forms. Bygate observes that "familiarity with the content of the task might enable speakers to pay more attention to its formulation" (1996:138).

4.3 Supporting intake

In example 1 above, we looked briefly at an example of a 'recast' which might not be noticed by a learner who is communicatively oriented:

1. Learner: I go there Wednesday

Teacher: You mean you went there, right? Last Wednesday?

But of course, this discourse segment actually contains some very important cues to the meaning of the past tense form 'went' - cues such as the teachers' use of the phrase 'last Wednesday'. Given enough time and attentional space, the learner could exploit this language, using it to confirm the correct time reference - completed past time - and then going on to see the link between this familiar language, and the new encoding of this meaning in the irregular form 'went'. But of course, in a communicative discourse these self-same cues are likely to deter the learner from probing any further into the language: once having confirmed the past meaning there is no need, communicatively speaking, to go further into the target grammar, and anyway the learner is likely to be too involved in unraveling and clarifying the potential misunderstanding to have much time to attend to the past tense.

This simple principle - that we can provide learners with cues in the context or in the surrounding language which help to orient learners to make sense of new language - has received little attention either in SLA research or in language pedagogy, but it is of great importance for intake, and for understanding how to present new language to our classroom learners. When we present new language to learners, we do so in some sort of a context - we might, for instance, present the past tense in the form of a dialogue which includes the kind of lexical cueing ('last Wednesday') illustrated above. Perhaps we need to do more, though, to ensure that our learners are exploiting such cues, and that they are oriented in such a way that they are very aware that such dialogues are not intended to serve any communicative purpose, or to be processed merely for communicatively necessary information.

4.4 Learning discourse

Now of course, we cannot legislate for a focus on form, we cannot make it happen. It would be naïve to say that providing a lexical cue such as 'last Wednesday' is going to make the learner attend to the related past tense form. Nor can we say that planning or task repetition are tasks which compel learners to use more complex language. Many factors intervene between intention and effect, as experienced teachers know all too well. In order for such activities to have real payoffs for language learning, a number of other factors need to be in place, besides simply having the right kind of task.

I would argue that such activities work best where the learners themselves are aware of the pedagogical purpose of such texts or task types, where they have already had experience of such procedures, and where they feel sufficiently secure to draw on such prior experiences the better to manage their learning activity. This may sound rather trite, but it is best to keep in mind how unnerving tasks can be when it is explicit that the learner is being asked to take risks with her language. In a recent study of task repetition (Irving, 1999), for instance, one learner comments on how very self-conscious she became once everyone knew that she was trying to use her 'best' language. Although in theory the opportunity for a second go allowed

her to pay more attention to her language the second time around - and indeed although she was able to take advantage of this by producing much more complex language - she nevertheless felt hugely unnerved by the experience, to the extent that she genuinely believed that her language was much better the first time around! When Irving subsequently asked her why this was so, this is what she said:

'Cos the words are not coming and you think I don't know it's different you just had to talk and you say stupid things and you make stupid mistakes which you realize but [last time] we are together and it was eas - yeh this time was like 'arghh! stupid mistake!' and you think 'oh no no no!'

(Irving, 1999: 106)

Partly because of this added pressure, learners need as much support as the task and the teacher can allow for. It is not communicatively appropriate to take such risks with one's language, and to flirt so openly with incomprehensibility! This is why a classroom culture where such practices are normal, and where learners and teachers are able to talk about why they do what they do and why they feel how they feel (rather as Irving did with her student quoted above), is likely to be the best kind of context to foster a genuinely learning discourse.

5. Concluding remarks: achieving balance

I have suggested that we need to distinguish between two kinds of classroom language use: communicative/transactional discourse and learning discourse, with the latter designed to encourage access to new or more complex language in ways which the former often deters.

But by way of conclusion, it needs to be noted that the two are not necessarily as distinct or as opposed as the foregoing discussion may suggest. After all, there is certainly a learning dimension to transactional discourse, because it is only through learning to deal with relatively unpredictable interactions that learners can ultimately achieve the level of fluency and adaptability which they will likely need in the 'real world'. My point, rather, is that we cannot expect this kind of agility simply to emerge, not without careful support and guidance along the way. Ultimately, the two discourses are best seen as being complementary, with learning discourse helping learners gain initial access to forms they will later need to deploy with ease, flexibility and communicative appropriacy.

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