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'Task' as Research Construct

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Abstract

The article examines 'task' as research construct as predominantly conceived in terms of task-as-workplan in the Task-based Learning/SLA literature. It is suggested that 'task' has weak construct validity and ontology in an overwhelmingly quantitative paradigm because the construct has a 'split personality'. Conceptualisation is based on the task-as-workplan but data are gathered from the task-in-process. The article demonstrates that the two can be very different. It is proposed that a secure basis for 'task' as research construct and for the quantification of discursal data is only attainable by switching the conceptual and methodological focus to task-in-process. Two examples are provided of how such a change of focus might be accomplished.

Introduction

Task-based Learning (TBL) has assumed a central role in both pedagogy and research, particularly in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). There is now a considerable volume of research in Task-based Learning and Second Language Acquisition (TBL/SLA) and Ellis's (2003) book-length study confirms the maturity of the field, linking together language learning and teaching theory and practice in a coherent perspective. This article does not critique TBL in any way as an approach to language learning and teaching. Rather, it considers whether 'task' as currently conceived in the TBL/SLA literature is a suitable construct to be used for research. This may at first seem an odd objective, since so much research clearly has been conducted on the basis of this construct. Furthermore, Pica (1997) suggests that one of the best examples of compatibility in the relationship between pedagogy and research is the concept of 'task'. However, it may be all the more important to examine whether the foundations of such a vast and growing edifice are secure or not. The investigation assumes that TBL/SLA operates predominantly in a quantitative paradigm which in turn assumes the importance of construct validity (Long, 1997) and a fundamentally objectivist ontological position. In practical terms, this means that the research construct 'task' has to have a tangible objective reality of its own and be concretely specifiable. This is vital because in a quantitative paradigm researchers must be certain that what they are actually measuring/researching is exactly the same thing as what they claim to be measuring/researching; this is the basis of its conception of validity. The assumption of a predominantly quantitative paradigm does not of course imply that qualitative work is not undertaken in TBL/SLA; see, for example, Hall and Verplaetse, 2000; Lantolf & Appel, 1994; Ohta, 2001. However, Lazaraton (2000)

found in a study of empirical articles in four prominent language teaching/SLA journals over a seven-year period that 88% were quantitative. This study adopts Bryman's (2001) position with respect to quantitative and qualitative research. This is that it is possible to distinguish differences between quantitative and qualitative research strategies in terms of the role of theory in research, epistemology and ontology. However, these should be seen as tendencies and there are complex interconnections between the two strategies. Furthermore, in some circumstances and if carefully planned, the two strategies may be combined in multi-strategy research.

At this point we need to provide two definitions vital to the argument of the article. The first is the difference between task-as-workplan and task-in-process¹ (Breen, 1989). The task-as-workplan is the intended pedagogy, the plan made prior to classroom implementation of what the teachers and learners will do². The task-in-process is the actual pedagogy or what actually happens in the classroom. The second definition distinguishes between an 'etic' or external analyst's perspective on human behaviour and an 'emic' or participant's perspective. According to Pike (1967, p. 37):

" The etic viewpoint studies behaviour as from outside of a particular system, and as an essential initial approach to an alien system. The emic viewpoint results from studying behaviour as from inside the system... Descriptions or analyses from the etic standpoint are 'alien' in view, with criteria external to the system. Emic descriptions provide an internal view, with criteria chosen from within the system."

The relationship between these two sets of constructs is as follows. A task-as-workplan can only be specified etically as at that stage there are no participants in

communicative behaviour to study. A task-in-process can be studied etically and overwhelmingly has been in the TBL/SLA literature. However, a task-in-process is a communicative event which can also be analysed emically if an appropriate methodology is used, for example Markee, 2000; Ohta, 2001; Seedhouse, 1999, 2004. At this point we can see tendencies to a paradigm division, with an etic perspective more appropriate to an objectivist ontological orientation in a quantitative paradigm and an emic perspective more appropriate to a constructionist or phenomenological ontological orientation in a qualitative paradigm (Bryman, 2001, p. 20). We will return to the issue of perspectives later.

We saw above that there are two different and potentially separate aspects to the construct 'task', namely the task-as-workplan and task-in-process. If we pose the question which of these is the construct used for conceptualisation by TBL/SLA research, then the answer is that it is overwhelmingly the task-as-workplan. According to Ellis (2003, p. 9), the first criterial feature of a task is that it is a workplan. If, however, we pose the question whether TBL/SLA research gathers data from the task-as-workplan or the task-in-process, the answer is that data are **always** gathered from the task-in-process, because that is the actual communicative event which generates interactional data. So we can see initially that there is potentially a serious threat to validity in a quantitative paradigm. What is purported to be measured/researched is conceptualised in terms of task-as-workplan, whereas what is actually measured/researched derives from the task-in process. This might presumably not be a serious problem if the task-as-workplan always translated perfectly and directly into the intended task-in-process. We now need to consider whether this is the case or not.

Do the two conceptions of 'task' correspond?

In practice, there is often a very significant difference between what is supposed to happen and what actually happens. There is now ample evidence in the literature (Coughlan & Duff, 1994; Donato, 2000; Foster, 1998; Ohta, 2000; Platt & Brooks, 1994; Mori, 2002; Roebuck, 2000) of tasks-as-workplan resulting in different and unexpected tasks-in-process. For example, Coughlan & Duff (1994) demonstrate that the same task-as-workplan does not yield comparable results in terms of task-in-process when performed by several individuals, or even when performed by the same individual on two different occasions. I will now illustrate how and why this mismatch occurs by examining data gathered from tasks-in-process. Markee (in press) demonstrates how learners recorded working on a pairwork task can switch instantly from on-task institutional talk to off-task social talk:

Extract 1

- 1 L9: this writer has a ra[ther- com- pli-] this is [co-] writer has a
- 2 L11: [I slept five ho-] [huh]
- 3 L9: complicated uh,
- 4 L11: yea:h [(h)] ((L11 looks left, lifts his left hand to his mouth
- 5 and looks down))
- 6 L9: [h] heh heh .hhh
- 7 L11: (what'd I say.)
- 8 (1.0) ((L9 scratches his forehead with his right hand.
- 9 Simultaneously, L11 drops his hand back to his lap.
- 10 As L11's hand reaches his lap, he begins his turn at line 11))

11 L11: I'm so tired I slept five hours ((L11 looks at his watch))

12 L11: that night ((L11 drops his hand back to his lap))

13 (0.6)

14 L9: a:::h. ((L9 uses a tone of mock sympathy))

(Markee, in press)

In lines 1 and 3, L9 tries to continue the official task-as-workplan topic of discussion of the writer Günter Grass' position in the debate on German reunification. But as L9 harks back to this previous topic, L11 overlaps L9 at line 2 with the announcement that he only slept five hours and introduces off-task social talk. L11 later invites L9 to a party that night where free beer is available! The social chat is in L2 English as the two learners have different L1s. Markee demonstrates how the learners in the extract carefully disguise their social talk from the teacher and are able to instantly switch back on-task when required. So learners can simply disengage from the intended pedagogical focus and produce whatever off-task talk interests them.

Tasks can be affected by group dynamics. In Seedhouse (1996) I recorded four separate groups of learners working on the same task and found that the interaction and enactment of the task-as-workplan was radically affected by group dynamics. In the groupwork below, for example, the group dynamics become the focus of the interaction as discussion becomes somewhat heated, with the following extract characterised by competition for the floor, interruptions and disagreement.

Extract 2

- 1 L2: aha. so how can you believe just like you said that everyone is like that when=
2 L3: =I don't say everyone.
3 L2: you just said the Italians doesn't want to=
4 L1: =yeah. and the Mexicans.
5 L2: so what so what do you suggest=
6 L3: =angry you get just angry=
7 L1: =no this was about=
8 L3: =just angry. you can twist and turn the words as much as you like but you
9 can't change my attitude.
10 L2: no but=
11 L1: =no but this is about education.
12 L3: stop twisting my words so fucking much.
13 L1: (laughs)
14 L3: you're twisting my words=

(Seedhouse, 1996, p. 400)

In the groupwork below, L3 assumed the interactional role of teacher and allocated turns to the other students. Resentment at L3's presumption and refusal to co-operate was sometimes evident:

Extract 3

L3: do you have anything to e:r (2.0) say about that?

L5: no (4.0) I don't think white dominance is threatened in the USA.

L3: why not?

L5: I don't think so?

LL: (laugh)

L3: you don't think so OK? and you Jon?

L6: e:m I don't really care.

L3: you don't really care.

L6: I don't live in the US.

L3: OK. e:m and you Tone?

L4: e:m I don't know. e:r

L3: OK.

(Seedhouse, 1996, p.380)

Learners may try to nominate their own focus instead of the task-as-workplan nominated by the teacher. A common scenario in the data is for learners to try to express personal meanings or issues which interest them.

Extract 4

(L2 is male and L6 is female)

1 T: okay do you have any questions about using these words? okay?

2 L: okay

3 L6: yeah

- 4 T: what
- 5 L6: how many- girlfriends do you have here? (to L2)
- 6 L2: o::h

(van Lier, 1988, p. 160)

According to van Lier (1988, p. 160) the above extract shows learners attempting to change a specific interaction type into another one because they prefer just talking to other, more regimented activities. In line 1, the teacher indicates that the questions should be about using specified words. L6 then self-selects, but the question is not within the allocated area (the use of specified words) and it shifts the focus to meaning and fluency, since it concerns classroom relationships.

Sometimes teachers (particularly inexperienced ones) fail to establish their intended pedagogical focus, i.e. the task-as-workplan is not enacted. This can occur in the data for a variety of reasons; in the extract below a communication problem arises. The teacher's task-as-workplan (according to Kumaravadivelu, 1993, pp. 16-17) was to help the learners learn and use superlative forms:

Extract 5

(lines 1-19 omitted)

- 20 (writes on blackboard) OK (.) Mr. Wallace is the tallest (.) of what (.) the tallest.
- 21 sometimes you don't have to use all of it because we know what we are talking
- 22 about, right? in a conversation if we don't know sometimes we may just have
- 23 to say yes or no, you know, and sometimes we have to give more information,

24 OK? (writes on blackboard) is the tallest of the class, right?

(Kumaravadivelu, 1993, pp. 20-21)

By line 24 the focus of the lesson seems to be narrowing down to the expression of comparison, and there is actually a sentence on the board which is an example of a superlative. Since the teacher's stated pedagogical focus is to have the learners produce utterances using the superlative structure, it appears at this point that a focus on superlatives is now being established.

Extract 5 (continued)

25 T: all right? eh (.) let's see (.) let's make a sentence with eh the same, OK? I

26 am (.)

27 L5: (.) as tall as you.

28 T: you don't understand what I am what I want.

29 L5: the same?

30 T: the same, yah (.) give me a sentence with the same.

31 L3: I am as tall as you are.

32 T: OK (writes on blackboard: 'I am as tall as you are'.) OK. eh (.) most of the time

33 (.) most of the time (.) or, let me put it this way (.) there are probably more

34 things that are different, right, than the same. would you agree with me? yah?

(Kumaravadivelu, 1993, pp. 20-21)

However, the procedural instructions which the teacher gives in line 25 are ambiguous. The teacher wants the learners to produce sentences using the same *structure* as that now on the board, but unfortunately the teacher elides the term 'structure'. L5 believes that '*the same*' means that the teacher wants him/her to transform the sentence on the board from a superlative structure to a comparison of equality structure, i.e. an 'as..as' structure. We can see in lines 25-30 that the learner and the teacher understand different things by the term '*the same*' and this is reinforced by the fact that another learner (L3) shows exactly the same interpretation of the instructions as L5 in line 31. Both L5 and L3 produce sentences using a comparison of equality structure. The teacher does not appear to be aware of the nature of the misunderstanding and eventually seems to feel compelled to accept the same type of utterance which she rejected in line 28 and writes it up on the board. She then attempts to explain that she is looking for superlative structures rather than comparisons of equality.

Extract 5 (continued)

- 35 T: let's see if we can talk about the worst (.) the coldest (.) you know the most
36 the most negative (.) OK. all right, the most negative (.) OK. all right, the
37 most negative. what's the worst for you? the worst experience (.) or something

(Kumaravadivelu, 1993, pp. 20-21)

Now the problem here is that the teacher is actually moving the focus away from the grammatical structure which has been targeted and written up on the board, in an attempt to contextualise the superlative structure. However, in the learner utterances which follow

there is no attempt to produce a superlative form. By the end of the extract, the focus has shifted from “talk about the worst thing in your country”, which has at least some connection with superlatives, to “talk about anything which might be a problem in your country”. The learners would by now be understandably confused as to the focus of the task. The problem in communication has led to the teacher being unable to establish the intended pedagogical focus, so the task-in-process bears very little resemblance to the task-as-workplan.

The task-as-workplan can also be affected by learner misunderstanding of participation requirements, as in the extract below.

Extract 6

- 1 T: now again (1.0) listen to me (1.0) }I've got a lamp{
- 2 LL: [I've] got a lamp
- 3 T: [wha-]
- 4 T: don't repeat now, don't say after me now. Alright I say it and you and you just
- 5 listen. I've got a lamp. what have you got? (1.0) raise your hands.

(Seedhouse, 1996, p. 472)

Students can also misunderstand the nature of the pedagogical focus.

Extract 7

T: I'm fine thanks and you? can you say that? I'm fine thanks and you?

L: e:r I'm fine too

T: okay can you just repeat that sentence, I'm fine thanks and you?

(van Lier, 1988, p. 200)

Here we find the teacher posing a display question and intending a form and accuracy focus but the learner answering as if it were a referential question within a meaning and fluency focus. Tension between focuses on form and accuracy and meaning and fluency, then, can often cause confusion and communication trouble.

Tasks-as-workplan can also be transformed by the organisation of classroom interaction (Seedhouse, 2004). The task-as-workplan in the extract below is for L8 to ask L11 a question with the present perfect followed by a question with the simple past. This sounds fairly unproblematic in terms of task-as-workplan, especially as the teacher has just drilled the learners in the infinitive, past simple and past participle forms of the verbs involved.

Extract 8

- 1 T: °have you ever° (whispers)
- 2 L8: (.) you ever: (.) gone to (.)
- 3 T: gone to?
- 4 L8: er: gone to Sümela Manastır? Sümela attraction?
- 5 L11: (1.0) hmm yes=
- 6 T: =YES [(laughs)]
- 7 LL: [(laughter)]

- 8 T: yes okay ask him now when? when?
- 9 L1: when?
- 10 LL: (laughter)
- 11 T: (uses body language) make a sentence (laughs)
- 12 L1: when uhm-
- 13 L11: last summer
- 14 TLL: (laughter)
- 15 T: when last summer okay (laughter) okay now someone else (.) ask him
- 16 with who with who

(Üstünel, 2003, p. 75)

A problem arises with the task-in-process precisely because the task-as-workplan interacts with the interactional organisation of the L2 classroom to produce a particular sequence organisation and because the learners interpret the pedagogical focus in a different way to that intended by the teacher. There is a question-answer adjacency pair in the present perfect in lines 2, 4 and 5. The consequence is that the follow-up question in lines 9 and 12 needs only the single word 'when?' to form a complete turn-constructive unit precisely by virtue of its sequential location. So, although we can see in line 11 that T wants a full sentence with the past simple, she accepts the sequence produced (line 15). The sequence which the learners have produced is a very 'natural' and understandable one and in fact their analysis of the task demonstrates a good understanding of sequential organisation. So the mismatch between task-as-workplan and task-in-process, between intended and actual pedagogy, is due to the way in which the pedagogical focus has interacted with the

interactional organisation of the L2 classroom and the way in which the learners have re-interpreted the task in the light of this.

So there is very clear evidence that, as Ellis (2003, p. 187) puts it, "...tasks of the kind commonly used in SLA research are not just performed but rather are interpreted, resulting in activity that is 'constructed' by the participants in accordance with their particular motives and goals." However, although this frequent mismatch between intended and actual pedagogy has been accepted in the TBL/SLA literature, the implications of the 'split personality' of the research construct 'task' have not as yet been related to construct validity and ontology in a quantitative paradigm. As noted above, TBL/SLA conceptualises 'task' in terms of task-as-workplan. This means that the research construct 'task' as currently conceived has very weak construct validity because research data are not gathered from it, but rather from the task-in-process. It also means that 'task' as currently conceived has a very shaky ontological status as it is of potentially marginal relevance to the research process. To be sure, the task-as-workplan may materially exist in the physical shape of a lesson plan or coursebook unit. However, the actual event which is researched and from which learners learn is always the task-in-process. This means that the task-in-process has a sound empirical basis and may be described and analysed empirically (as with the extracts above) whereas the task-as-workplan does not necessarily have any empirical basis.

Whose Focus?

We now return to the distinction between an etic and emic focus. We saw earlier that the basis of conceptualisation in TBL/SLA is the task-as-workplan, which can only

be specified etically, i.e. from an analyst's perspective. However, the TBL/SLA literature makes crucial and widespread use of the term 'focus' in relation to the participants in the task-in-process. In particular, there is a major conceptual problem inherent in the literature on form-focused instruction (FFI), namely whose focus is it? Is it the researcher's etic focus, the etic focus of the teacher's task-as-workplan or the learner's emic focus? As Ellis (2001, p. 26) points out:

"Conceptualizing FFI in terms of types and options is not unproblematic.

The three types of FFI rest on the distinction between focus on form and focus on meaning. The question arises as to how this focus is to be determined. Whose perspective is to be considered? Is the focus to be determined in terms of the researcher's or teacher's intention or in terms of particular learners' response to instruction? ...Classroom learners may or may not respond in the way intended."

Looking at the FFI literature, it seems quite clear that the view is that it should be the learner's perspective which is the vital one. Long's (1996, p. 429) definition of focus on form is that learners "attend to language as object during a generally meaning-oriented activity" and he notes that "...learners need to attend to a task if acquisition is to occur, but ... their orientation can best be to both form and meaning, not to either form or meaning alone." According to Doughty (2001, p. 211) "the factor that distinguishes focus on form from other pedagogical approaches is the requirement that focus on form involves learners' briefly and perhaps simultaneously attending to form, meaning and use during one cognitive event." Nowhere in the FFI literature, however, do we find any description of the emic methodology which researchers are

to use in order to identify what the learners' focus is on during the task-in-process. In order to do this, researchers would have to analyse the classroom discourse and develop an emic perspective in order to ascertain what the learners are focussing on. However, FFI has derived its typology of pedagogical activities in a top-down, etic way from theory and pedagogy (Ellis, 2001) rather than in a bottom-up, emic way from interactional data. In other words, FFI attempts to specify from the etic perspective of task-as-workplan what the learners' emic focus **will be** when they undertake the task-in-process. As we have seen above, it is not possible to specify in advance how learners will interpret a task-as-workplan. It would not be sufficient to 'sample' task-based interaction. As we have seen above, learners' focus while on (or off) task can shift instantaneously; see also Sullivan (2000) and Seedhouse (1996, 2004). The only way to establish what learners actually focus on during a task is by a detailed, case by case emic analysis of the entire interactional data for the whole task-in-process. Determining the perspectives of others is a fundamentally constructionist/phenomenologist undertaking belonging to the qualitative paradigm (Bryman, 2001, p. 20). The point to be made here, then, is that the TBL/SLA project crucially requires an emic methodology to analyse the task-in-process and to ascertain the focus of the participants but has as yet not adopted such a methodology.

Does the 'Split Personality' affect Research?

At this point it may be objected that the frequent disparity between task-as-workplan and task-in-process has not proved a serious problem for TBL/SLA research; so many studies have been done and there have been no reports of mismatches affecting the validity of research. In order to determine whether there

may be an impact, we need to examine a representative TBL/SLA study which uses interactional data and which provides evidence not only of the task-as-workplan but also of the task-in-process in the form of transcripts of the interaction. The vast majority of studies do not provide task-in-process interactional transcript data which may be compared with the task-as-workplan. However, one prominent study which does so and which I take to be a representative example of quantitative mainstream TBL/SLA work in the area of recasts, is Long et al. (1998). This study has been widely cited (e.g. Doughty and Williams 1998; Ellis 2001) as evidence of the effectiveness of recasts. In Long et al. 's (1998) quantitative laboratory study, learners of Japanese and Spanish were intended to receive either recasts or modelling in relation to two new structures, a post-test revealing recasts to produce more short-term improvement than modelling. According to Long et al. (1998, p. 366):

"Examples 12 and 13 exemplify use of the target structures in the recast condition:

Example 12:

Prompt:	A veces
	(Sometimes)
Participant:	Elena toma a veces cafe
	(Elena drinks sometimes coffee)
Researcher:	Elena toma a veces café, si? uhuh
	(Elena drinks sometimes coffee, right? uhuh)

Example 13:

Prompt:	La guitarra
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(The guitar)

Participant: Pedro tiene la guitarra

(Pedro has the guitar)

Researcher: La guitarra la tiene Pedro, si? uhuh

(The guitar it has Pedro, right? uhuh) "

If we analyse the data closely, however, we can see that there are three fundamental problems in terms of construct validity in a quantitative paradigm. Firstly, neither example is a corrective recast. In both examples the participant produces a sentence which is morphosyntactically correct, therefore the researcher's subsequent turn cannot possibly be a corrective recast³, according to the definition⁴ provided by Long et al. in the same article (1998, p. 358):

"Corrective recasts are responses which, although communicatively oriented and focused on meaning rather than form, incidentally reformulate all or part of a learner's utterance, thus providing relevant morphosyntactic information that was obligatory but was either missing or wrongly supplied, in the learner's rendition, while retaining its central meaning..."

We must also question in what way the researcher's turns could possibly be construed as 'focused on meaning rather than form' or 'incidentally' reformulating; see point three below.

Secondly, the researcher's turns in the two examples are clearly rather different or heterogenous as actions. In example 12 the researcher repeats the participant's turn

verbatim, whereas in 13 she alters the syntactical structure. However, the two different sequences are homogenised as 'recasts' in the quantitative data treatment. Indeed, in order for SLA to quantify interactional phenomena, it must treat them as if they were homogenous. These two examples are presented by Long et al. as typical and no evidence is presented as to the degree of homogeneity or heterogeneity of the discourse produced by the other 28 participants in the Spanish experiment.

Thirdly, there is a mismatch between intended and actual pedagogy, between task-as-workplan and task-in-process. We can see from the definition above that the researcher's move is supposed to be "communicatively oriented and focused on meaning". Long et al. describe the pedagogy as "communication tasks" and "communicative". However, when we examine the examples, what we actually find is an audio-recorded prompt for the participants to produce a string of linguistic forms which is then evaluated for syntactic accuracy by the researcher. In language teaching parlance this is a structural drill typical of audio-lingualism. Extract 9 below, by contrast, contains two examples of authentic recasts (lines 5 and 7) which do conform to Long et al.'s definition. By comparing these to Long et al.'s two examples we can see just how dissimilar the sequential environments are and how unlike recasts the two examples above are. My argument is that such mismatches are verging on the inevitable if there is an etic, top-down specification of pedagogy (task-as-workplan) with no corresponding emic, case by case analysis of the discorsal data (task-in-process) which actually result before quantitative treatment is undertaken. It is standard practice in mainstream SLA studies using interactional data to find a concept or construct specified in terms of task-as-workplan but to find that the data are actually gathered from the task-in-process which may be (as in this case) rather different.

The purpose of the above discussion is not to challenge the overall validity of Long's considerable work, nor of the use of quantification in TBL/SLA in general. This study does not seek to discourage quantification - it is *premature quantification* of discorsal data without prior analysis which it seeks to discourage, or as Schegloff (1993, p. 114) puts it: "we need to know what the phenomena are, how they are organized, and how they are related to each other as a precondition for cogently bringing methods of quantitative analysis to bear on them". The point to be made here is that it is invalid to homogenise discorsal data by inputting them into quantitative machinery without first having conducted a case by case qualitative emic analysis. This is hardly a new observation; as long ago as 1988 van Lier (1988, p. 223) wrote that he had "consistently warned against studies which isolate superficially identifiable features for quantitative treatment." As we will see below, L2 classroom interaction is extremely complex, functions on different levels and requires in-depth emic analysis.

Shifting the Focus to Task-in-Process

So far we have examined the problems arising from the 'split personality' of the research construct 'task'. How can these be resolved? Since I may appear to have been very critical of TBL/SLA approaches so far I should clarify that this is intended to be constructive since, in my opinion, the problems identified stem from TBL/SLA's predominant current focus on the task-as-workplan. These can be solved if the conceptual and analytical focus shifts to the task-in-process in the classroom. I suggest two solutions. The first is more radical in that it involves transforming TBL/SLA

research into multi-strategy research. The second is less radical in that it involves a minor change in focus for current TBL/SLA practice.

Solution One

The first solution is that TBL/SLA would adopt a multi-strategy research approach and separate its research processes into two stages. Furthermore, it would change its focus of analysis from the task-as-workplan to the task-in-process. The first stage of the two-stage process would involve the following:

- 1) conduct an emic, holistic microanalysis of each extract as an instance of discourse in its own right;
- 2) accept that the first stage will operate in a qualitative paradigm and adopt qualitative, emic concepts of validity, reliability, epistemology etc. in relation to the discourse which it uses for input which are different to and separate from those which it uses for the quantification stage. These concepts are outlined in Seedhouse (2004);
- 3) any definitions and categorisations used in the study (including that of the 'task') would have to be generated inductively, bottom-up from the data. In other words, a shift to the task-in-process would be necessary;
- 4) adopt a perspective on socially shared cognition and learning;

In the second stage the analysed interactional data (e.g. recasts) could be used for quantitative treatment with their construct validity assured. Conversation Analysis (CA) is able to provide all that is necessary for the first stage of the process

(Seedhouse, 2004), so there is a clear role or 'vacant slot' which CA can play in that part of the SLA project which relates to interactional data. Such a preliminary stage is particularly necessary with phenomena like recasts, which occur 'incidentally' as and when errors occur, are therefore bound to be unique and heterogenous and would certainly have to be analysed as individual instances before quantification. The proposed first stage would provide additional benefits to the TBL/SLA project. Firstly, it would supply an emic methodology to determine learners' focus which is vital for the focus-on-form project. Secondly, there are well-known conceptual problems involved in the numerous different definitions of what is (and is not) a 'task', summarised in Ellis (2003, pp. 2-9). However, these problems stem from the decision to base the approach on an etic focus on task-as-workplan rather than on task-in-process in the classroom. It is, however, possible to inductively derive theoretical or pedagogical constructs, definitions and categories from empirical data; this gives any quantitative treatment a firm basis and a correspondence between theory and practice. That this is feasible is demonstrated by Ellis (2001) and Ellis et al. (2001), who have derived some instructional categories in FFI from studies of classroom processes. Ellis (2001, p. 22), for example, derives the constructs 'pre-emptive' and 'reactive' focus-on-form inductively from classroom data.

Practical Analysis

How would this proposed shift from the conception of 'task' from task-as-workplan to task-in-process work in practice and what would be the advantages of such an approach? In order to exemplify this I will now analyse in considerable detail

a short extract which can link to TBL/SLA research on recasts and FFI and also explicate the CA approach to socially distributed cognition and learning.

Extract 9

- 1 T: Vin, have you ever been to the movies? What's your favorite movie?
- 2 L: Big.
- 3 T: Big, OK, that's a good movie, that was about a little boy inside a big man, wasn't it?
- 4 L: Yeah, boy get surprise all the time.
- 5 T: Yes, he was surprised, wasn't he? Usually little boys don't do the things that men do, do they?
- 6 L: No, little boy no drink.
- 7 T: That's right, little boys don't drink.

(Johnson, 1995, p. 23)

We will start by outlining the organisation of the interaction. If we analyse turn-taking, sequence organisation, repair and topic at the same time, we can see that the learner in extract 9 is able to develop a sub-topic and is allowed interactional space. In line 1 T introduces the carrier topic (films) and constrains L's turn in line 2, which is a minimum response appropriate to the turn. In line 3 T shifts the topic slightly from the carrier topic (films) to the sub-topic of the specific film 'Big' which has been nominated by L. In doing so T validates and approves L's sub-topic by calling it a good movie. This particular comedy movie involves a 'magical' change in

which a young boy's mind is transferred into a man's body. T constrains L's next turn by making a general statement summarising the plot of the movie ("that was about a little boy inside a big man") together with a tag question. This allocates L a turn, constrains the topic of L's turn (the plot of the film 'Big') and simultaneously provides the other students in the class (who may not know the film) with sufficient information to be able to follow the evolving dialogue. The tag question effectively requires L to confirm the accuracy of T's summary of the film's plot, but also allows L the interactional space (if L wishes) to develop the sub-topic. L does confirm T's summary of the sub-topic and then chooses to contribute new information which develops the sub-topic (the film's plot), namely in line 4 ("boy get surprise all the time"). This utterance is linguistically incorrect, although the propositional content is clear. Since L is introducing 'new' information, L is effectively developing the sub-topic, to which T could respond in his/her next turn. At this point T could choose to 1) correct the learner's utterance 2) continue to develop the sub-topic 3) decline to adopt L's sub-topic and change the course of the interaction: T has superior interactional rights and is not obliged to adopt the direction in which L is pushing the interaction. T effectively chooses to combine choices 1) and 2) in line 5: "Yes, he was surprised, wasn't he?" There is positive evaluation of the propositional content of the learner utterance followed by an expansion of the learner utterance into a correct sequence of linguistic forms. The type of repair used is embedded correction (Jefferson, 1987, p. 95), that is, a repair done as a by-the-way occurrence in the context of a conversational move, which in this case is a move of agreement and confirmation. It also conforms to Long et al's definition of 'recast' as quoted above. Further in line 5, T then accepts L's invitation to develop the sub-topic, and T's statement "usually little boys don't do the things that men do" also simultaneously provides the other students

in the class with an explanation as to why the boy was surprised all the time, thus enabling them to continue to follow the evolving dialogue. The tag question (line 5) again allocates L a turn and effectively allots him the interactional space to continue to develop the sub-topic should he wish to do so. L uses 'no' in line 6 to agree with the negative tag-question and chooses to develop the sub-topic by providing an example from the film to illustrate T's previous generalised statement with: "little boy no drink". Again his utterance is linguistically incorrect, although the propositional content is clear. Since L is again introducing 'new' information, L effectively invites T to respond to this elaboration of the sub-topic in T's next turn. T's response in line 7 is similar to line 5 in that T performs a move of agreement, simultaneously corrects L's utterance (using embedded correction) and displays a correct version for the other students. So, the interaction is dynamic, fluid and locally managed on a turn-by-turn basis to a considerable extent. There is some degree of pre-planning in that the teacher has an overall idea of what is to be achieved in the interaction and in that it is the teacher who introduces the carrier topic of films and has overall control of the speech exchange system. However, the question in line 1 is an open or referential one - the teacher does not know how L will respond - and L is able to nominate and develop a sub-topic. I would now like to demonstrate that the teacher is balancing multiple and sometimes conflicting demands. As Edmondson (1985, p. 162) puts it: "... the complexity of the classroom is such that several things may be going on publicly through talk at the same time." The teacher is orienting to five separate (though related) concerns simultaneously:

- 1) the teacher's task-as-workplan (Johnson, 1995, p. 23) "... was to allow the students to share their ideas and possibly generate some new vocabulary words within

the context of the discussion.” This implies that the teacher needs to control the overall topic whilst allowing the learners some interactional space to develop their own sub-topics. The teacher has to orient, then, to an overall pedagogical plan.

- 2) The teacher also has to respond to the ideas and personal meanings which the learner chooses to share, and does so successfully in that he/she develops the sub-topic introduced by the learner. So in lines 5 and 7 the teacher responds to the learner utterance with a conversational move of agreement which validates the propositional content of the utterance as well as the introduction of the sub-topic.
- 3) The teacher also responds to linguistic incorrectness in the individual learner’s utterances and conducts embedded repair on them. The linguistic repair is performed in a mitigated way because it is prefaced by a move of agreement and approval and because this type of embedded correction can be treated as a by-the-way matter.
- 4) The teacher must also orient to the other learners in the class. One problem faced by teachers is that individual learners often produce responses which are inaudible or incomprehensible to the other students in the class. So in lines 5 and 7 the teacher is simultaneously displaying approved versions of learner utterances so that the other learners are able to follow the propositional content of the interaction and are also able to receive correctly formed linguistic input.
- 5) The teacher in the above extract is skilfully managing to maintain elements of a simultaneous dual focus on both form and meaning. There is a focus on form in that the teacher upgrades and expands the learner’s utterances on a linguistic level, which means that the learners have a linguistically correct utterance

which can function as both model and input. The focus is simultaneously also on meaning in that the learner is able to contribute 'new' information concerning his/her personal experiences and to develop a sub-topic. This relates directly to the FFI goal of orienting to both form and meaning quoted above.

We now need to explicate the CA position on 'cognition' and 'learning' by analysing the above extract. CA involves the explication of the organisation of socially distributed cognition (Drew, 1995; Schegloff, 1991). The organisations of sequence, turn-taking, preference and repair are employed by interactants in order to display not only their social actions but also their understandings of the other's social actions; these organisations constitute part of the architecture of intersubjectivity. Since this may sound abstract, I will illustrate how this is operationalised in the above extract, focussing on lines 4 and 5 only. In line 4 L displays an understanding of T's turn in line 3. How do we know what the understanding is which L has displayed in line 4? We know this by normative reference to the interactional organisations employed. There are two kinds of interactional evidence. Firstly, the kind of action which L's turn performs; L confirms T's summary of the sub-topic and contributes new information which develops the sub-topic (the film's plot), and exemplifies what happened in the film's plot ("boy get surprise all the time"). The second piece of evidence is that T's turn in line 5 confirms that L's turn displays a correct understanding of T's turn in line 3. So we know this by reference to a) the turn-taking system, L having been specifically allocated a turn by the tag question in line 3 b) sequence organisation, which tells us that line 4 is an answer to a question about the plot of the film. In interactional sequences, then, evidence in relation to socially distributed cognition is available and piles up, layer upon layer. The utterance in line

4 is linguistically incorrect, although we can see that the propositional content is clear to T, since T's turn in line 5 displays understanding of the content of L's turn in line 4. T displays understanding by positively evaluating the propositional content of the learner utterance followed by an expansion of the learner utterance into a correct sequence of linguistic forms, using embedded correction in the context of a move of agreement and confirmation.

It should be made quite explicit at this point that CA does not claim to be able to establish the 'cognitive state' of individuals. What it is able to portray and explicate, however, is the progress of intersubjectivity or socially distributed cognition. CA aims to "identify ways in which participants themselves orient to, display, and make sense of one another's cognitive states (among other things)" (Drew, 1995, p. 79). The point is, then, that the interactants are displaying to each other (and to the rest of the class and to the analyst) their understanding of each others' utterances by means of and by reference to the organisation of turn-taking, sequence and repair. This demonstrates what Schegloff (1991, p. 152) means by "the embeddedness, the inextricable intertwinedness, of cognition and interaction". The CA analysis not only demonstrates *what* understandings the interactants display to each other, but also *how* they do so by normative reference to the interactional organisations. In other words, we gain access to their displays of understanding to each other in the same way that they gain this access, i.e. by reference to the interactional organisations; this is what is meant by developing an emic perspective. Psychology, SLA and CA do not have any means of establishing a *direct* window into an individual's 'cognitive state' whilst they are engaged in L2 classroom interaction. We do need to try to conceptualise what this might mean in practice, though; what factors might be involved in an individual's cognitive state in such a stream of interaction? Looking at line 4 of extract 9, L is not

merely producing an utterance in the L2; any utterance is a document on many levels and we saw previously that L2 classroom interaction operates on a number of levels simultaneously. The utterance is a display of the learner's analysis of the prior utterance of an interactant, it performs a social action in response and it positions the learner in a social system. It displays an understanding of the current context (sequential, social and the current task-in-process) and also renews it. It documents the learner's cognitive, emotional and attitudinal states - note that this does not mean it gives a direct window into these states. In the specific case of the L2 classroom the learner's utterance may in addition be delivered in the L2 and may thereby document his/her actual developmental level as well. So we can see that a part of what is meant by the 'cognitive state' of a learner involved in L2 classroom interaction is inextricably entwined and engaged with the unique sequential, social and contextual environment in which he/she is engaged. It is argued that this part of the individual's cognitive state can be portrayed emically in situ i.e. in that unique environment. This is not to suggest that this provides anything more than a part of the whole picture, nor that the methods employed by SLA and psychology are not useful in portraying other aspects of the full picture in relation to cognition. The point to be made, however, is that CA is able to make a major contribution to the SLA project in terms of the portrayal of socially distributed cognition (Markee, 2000, p. 3). Ohta (2001) demonstrates how socially distributed cognition can work in the L2 classroom. Recasts are not necessarily just responses by the teacher to one learner. Ohta shows (by recording and transcribing the private talk of individually microphoned students in a classroom) that other students can use recasts in which they are not personally involved as negative evidence and display uptake in their private talk.

We will now attempt a CA analysis of 'learning' in relation to extract 9 in three stages. Firstly, what can we say about the learner's actual developmental level or current ability in L2? We can note in lines 4 and 6 that his grammatical resources are fairly limited. Nonetheless, the learner is able to make use of these limited resources to nominate a sub-topic (line 2) and develop the sub-topic by exemplifying T's comments (lines 4 and 6). Although it can be challenging for children to interact with the teacher in a classroom setting, even in the L1, we can see that L is able to use the turn-taking and sequence organisations of the L2 proficiently, producing a correct response to a negative tag-question (line 4) and a positive tag question (line 6). As we saw above, T's turn in line 5 operates on a number of levels. From the learner's perspective, it is not just a matter of understanding the propositional content of what T says in the L2; it is also a matter of analysing what social and sequential action T is performing and what an appropriate social and sequential action in response would be. So we can see that L manages skilfully to co-construct meaning with T in the L2 from his limited grammatical resources.

Secondly, what can we say about the learning environment in terms of input to the language learning process and facilitation of upgrading as a result of the interaction? Line 5 reads: "Yes, he was surprised, wasn't he?" We will break its contribution down into four points. Firstly, the utterance places the sequence within the teacher's overall pedagogical plan for the lesson, which "... was to allow the students to share their ideas and possibly generate some new vocabulary words within the context of the discussion" (Johnson, 1995, p. 23). Secondly, it promotes positive affect and motivation in that the teacher engages with the ideas and personal meanings which the learner chooses to share and produces a conversational move of agreement which validates the utterance. It then demonstrates confidence in the

learner by returning the floor to him with the tag question. Thirdly, it enables the other learners in the class to follow the topic of the interaction and to receive correctly formed linguistic input, which Ohta (2001) has shown to be important. Fourthly, and most importantly, there is positive evaluation of the propositional content of the learner utterance followed by an expansion of the learner utterance into a correct sequence of linguistic forms or embedded correction. In terms of input, the teacher provides a corrected version of the learner's turns in lines 4 and 6 whilst retaining a focus on meaning. This form of correction and expansion is highly reminiscent of adult-child conversation, (see, for example, adult-child conversation transcripts in Peccei (1994, p. 83), Painter (1989, p. 38). The technique being used by the teacher here is often termed 'scaffolding' (Johnson, 1995, p. 75). Ohta (2001, p. 9) defines Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in relation to SLA in the following terms: "For the L2 learner, the ZPD is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by individual linguistic production, and the level of potential development as determined through language produced collaboratively with a teacher or peer." What we can see in this extract, then, is how a ZPD is talked into being through the organisation of the interaction. Specifically, we see a neat juxtaposition of the learner's actual developmental level in lines 4 and 6 with the potential level in lines 5 and 7. The SLA literature terms this move a recast and it conforms to Long et al.'s definition of recasts quoted above. So from the perspectives of SLA psycholinguistic theory, L1 acquisition studies and Vygotskian social constructivist educational theory there is agreement that such sequences are beneficial. A CA analysis demonstrates the same point. The distinctive CA contribution on the micro level is to show *how* learning is constructed by the use of interactional resources and

to explicate the progress of their learning and their socially distributed cognition or intersubjectivity.

Thirdly, how does the process of instructed L2 learning progress? In Seedhouse (2004), I suggest that the canonical way in which L2 teaching progresses is that the L2 teacher introduces a pedagogical focus and the learners produce specific linguistic forms and patterns of interaction in the L2 in normative orientation to the pedagogical focus. The teacher then evaluates the learners' turns and progresses the lesson in a particular direction on the basis of that evaluation. So in the above extract we can see that the teacher analyses the learner's contribution positively and continues to promote the learner's nominated topic. The point is, then, that we as analysts have access to some of the same interactional evidence of the learners' 'learning states' as the teachers have⁵ as well as access to the pedagogical/interactional steps the teacher takes in reaction to such evidence. In other words, we have access to the same emic perspective of the learning process in interaction to which the teacher has access. This type of evidence of learning may complement that gathered through mainstream SLA studies. Schegloff (1991) demonstrates that CA gives access to socially-distributed cognition. In the same way, CA gives access to socially-distributed language learning processes. As with cognition, this is only one part of the whole picture, but a useful one nevertheless. There is a problem in the SLA-as-cognitive-science position which insists that it is the **individual** cognitive state that is the proper domain of enquiry (Long & Doughty, 2003, p. 866) rather than one important element in a broad and complex domain of enquiry. The problem is that SLA-as-cognitive-science uses spoken discourse as a prime source of data and discourse is (amongst other things) the **social** display of cognitive states rather than a direct window into a cognitive state. This suggests that a perspective on socially distributed cognition combined with a

conversation analysis methodology could be complementary to SLA-as-cognitive-science. So in this section we have seen that a qualitative, emic CA analysis is able to identify, analyse and prepare for quantitative treatment phenomena of interest to TBL/SLA including recasts, FFI, dual focus on form and meaning and to portray the progress of socially distributed cognition and learning. I have demonstrated that it is possible to shift the conceptual focus in research from the task-as-workplan to the task-in-process and have exemplified how a task-in-process can be analysed. This then assures the validity of subsequent quantitative treatment, since that which is purported to be researched/measured is identical to that which is actually researched/measured.

Solution Two

There is also a less radical option which can still shift the focus of conceptualisation from the task-as-workplan to the task-in-process. Samuda (2001) notes that few TBL studies have been set in intact classes or examine the role of the teacher in the TBL process. Samuda's study, however, examines the teacher's pedagogical and interactional involvement in the task-in-process in an intact class. Moreover, her study traces the shifts in participant focus during the task-in-process; this alternates between a focus on form and on meaning. The following features of Samuda (2001) enable a focus on the task-in-process. The data are collected from an authentic classroom setting. There is a detailed contextual description of the setting, the participants, the teacher and the teacher's involvement. The task-as-workplan and teaching materials are described and there are a number of transcripts of the relevant interaction, so the task-in-process and the task-as-workplan can be compared.

Conclusion

Finally, it must be made crystal clear that this article is **not** criticising the use of quantification in SLA, nor the usefulness of cognitive science approaches to the overall SLA project, nor the value of the TBL approach. There is, however, currently a serious threat to validity in a quantitative paradigm caused by the current split conception of the research construct 'task' and by premature quantification of discursial data. However, these threats can be removed by shifting the conceptual and analytical focus to the task-in-process and by adopting an emic, qualitative methodology for the prior analysis of discursial data. Two possible solutions have been proposed. The first involves a major shift in practice to a multi-strategy research agenda and is time-consuming. However, it offers a basis for grounding conceptions of learning, socially distributed cognition, focus on form/meaning firmly in interactional data as well as a means of assuring the construct validity of phenomena for quantitative treatment. The second solution is less radical, but nonetheless enables a shift in conceptual and analytical focus to the task-in-process.

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¹ Breen (1989) also included 'task-as-outcomes' in his three phases of a task.

² Coughlan and Duff (1994) use the terms 'task' and 'activity' to express the same distinction.

³ Moreover, one of the aims of Long et al.'s study (pp. 358-9) is to investigate whether learners can use recasts as negative evidence. Clearly, negative evidence can only be used by learners in relation to grammatically incorrect sentences.

⁴ Note also Ellis et al's (2002, p. 423) definition of recast: "This consists of a reformulation of either the whole or part of the student's utterance containing an error in such a way as to maintain the student's intended meaning."

⁵ Although we do not necessarily have access to all of the cues which the teacher does, e.g. non-verbal ones.