

## ON EXAMINING COMMUNICATIVE TASKS IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

**Golda J. Tulung**

*Sam Ratulangi University, Manado*

**Abstract:** Studies of second language acquisition (SLA) suggest that communicative tasks can provide the conditions and processes that may facilitate second language learning. Attempting to understand how communicative tasks may promote SLA, this article examines communicative tasks in second language learning by (1) defining and categorizing tasks, (2) providing theoretical rationale for tasks with respect to meaningful oral exchanges or interaction generated from tasks, and (3) discussing how the linguistic and interactional characteristics of the exchanges may differentially promote learners' language acquisition.

**Key words:** communicative tasks, SLA

Bygate, Skehan, and Swain (2001), Crookes and Gass (1993a, 1993b), and Skehan (1998) have reviewed work on tasks that assert the importance of tasks for learners' language development and the implication for language teaching. This article particularly examines communicative tasks in second language learning. First, it looks at various definitions and types of task employed in language learning. Second, it provides theoretical rationale for tasks regarding meaningful oral exchanges or interaction generated from tasks. Third, it discusses how the linguistic and interactional characteristics of the exchanges may differentially promote learners' language acquisition.

The term 'task' began to be used deliberately in the early 1980s by two groups of professionals for their own purposes: as a concept used in second language curriculum by communicative language teachers and as an aspect of research methodology by SLA researchers (Crookes & Gass, 1993a; Bygate, Ske-

han, & Swain, 2001). Bygate, Skehan, and Swain further state that earlier communicative language teachers designed activities that promoted interaction and required language use for communicative purposes, and “attempts were made to develop methodologies and principles by which such tasks could be used effectively” (p. 3). In another perspective, SLA researchers have looked at interaction because it promotes negotiation of meaning which is argued to be a catalyst in acquisitional processes, and “tasks may be used as a device to uncover the effective engagement of acquisitional processes” (p. 4). This paper attempts to understand how communicative tasks may promote second language acquisition.

### **DEFINITIONS AND TYPES OF TASK**

‘Task’ has been vaguely and variously defined. Kumaravadivelu (1993) presents definitions proposed by writers who exemplify two extremes: tasks as anything done in the classroom, and tasks as activity or practice of activities that learners are likely to do in the target language outside the classroom. More specifically, Nunan (1989) defines the communicative task as “a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form” (p. 10). Skehan (1998), in his attempts to include most of the characteristics from other definitions, proposes a definition of task as an activity in which:

- meaning is primary;
- there is some communication problem to solve;
- there is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities;
- task completion has some priority;
- the assessment of the task is in terms of outcome. (p.95)

Considering the different purposes to which tasks are used, Bygate, Skehan, and Swain (2001) suggest define tasks based on the pragmatic/pedagogic, learning, and assessment purposes. Despite these various definitions, central to the definitions is their focus on meaning. McDonough and Mackey (2000) point out that “at the core of each definition is an emphasis on the communication of meaning” (p. 82). In this case, interaction between or among those doing the task is focused on negotiating meaning.

Like its definitions, task types vary depending on its characteristics and effects on performance. Pica, Kanagy, and Falodun (1993) explicate two recurrent task features (interactional activity and communicative goal) and propose a task typol-

ogy based on these features. They expand the features into four categories that cover:

- 1) Interactant relationship of request and suppliance activities, based on which interactants hold, request, or supply information directed toward task interaction and outcomes.
- 2) Interaction requirement for activity of request-suppliance directed toward task outcomes.
- 3) Goal orientation in using information requested and supplied.
- 4) Outcome options in attempting to meet goals. (pp. 14-15)

In addition, they report that jigsaw and information gap tasks generate more interaction, more turns, and greater negotiation of meaning because these tasks provide “the greatest opportunity for students to interact seeking comprehensible input and modify their output for communication” (p. 31). These tasks are done in pairs or small groups.

Other research studies of task-based instruction concerning task features and task implementation have shown that different types of task goals lead to different operations carried out within the tasks and that these have an impact on performance. Brown (1991) proposes three different dimensions for the analysis of tasks: tight-loose, closed-open, and procedural-interpretative, and suggests that interpretative tasks lead to greater levels of language complexity and a willingness to hypothesize. Foster and Skehan (1996) investigate three different kinds of tasks (personal, narration, and decision-making tasks), each under three different conditions (unplanned, undetailed planning, and detailed planning). They report that planning has significant effects on fluency, complexity, and accuracy. In other words, linguistic complexity, fluency, and accuracy increase when learners have time to plan before they begin a task. As can be seen, different tasks lead to different outcomes. It is then imperative to look at the rationale behind the use of tasks.

## **THEORETICAL RATIONALE FOR TASK**

Studies of SLA (e.g. Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Lightbown & Spada, 1999; and Towell & Hawkins, 1994) have revealed that language learning is a non-linear, organic, and developmental process, and that students do not acquire the target language in the order it is presented to them but follow developmental sequences at different levels. The use of communicative tasks in the classroom follows this contemporary view of language learning. Particularly in task-based in-

struction, tasks are placed centrally as a unit of analysis for language development (Long & Crookes, 1992; Wesche & Skehan, 2002). According to Foster (1999), “giving learners tasks to transact, rather than items to learn provides an environment which best promotes language learning process” (p. 69). Thus by transacting tasks, engaging in meaningful activities that focus on meaning and comprehensibility of the language, learners’ interlanguage is stretched and developed (Foster & Skehan, 1996).

Long’s (1985) interaction hypothesis could be argued to be one of the main rationale for using communicative tasks in the second language classroom. This hypothesis follows the information processing model in cognitive theory that uses an input-output metaphor for language learning. The interaction hypothesis, associated closely with Krashen’s (1985) input hypothesis, may be summarized thus: 1) Interactional modification makes input comprehensible. 2) Comprehensible input promotes acquisition. Therefore, 3) interactional modification promotes acquisition. According to Long, interaction facilitates acquisition because of the conversational and linguistic modifications occurring in such discourse. This condition may provide learners with the precise input they need to progress in mastering their target language, input tailored to their immediate needs, and which responds to their communication difficulties in a motivated situation. Both Krashen and Long recognize the importance of simplified input and contextual support in making input comprehensible. However, Long stresses the importance of interactive input since it is more effective than non-interactive input in negotiating meaning when a communication problem arises. In this way, learners often negotiate meaning in communicative tasks to obtain mutual comprehension using a variety of strategies such as comprehension questions, clarification checks, recasts, and so forth. In other words, negotiation of meaning generated from communicative tasks can enhance SLA: “language learning is assisted through the social interaction of learners and their interlocutors, particularly when they negotiate meaning toward mutual comprehension of each other’s message meaning” (Pica, Kanagy & Falodun 1993, p. 11).

Recently, there have been a few studies that have empirically demonstrated that interaction containing negotiation and recasts can facilitate students’ language development. The studies of question formation on adult second language (L2) learners having different first languages (Mackey & Philip, 1998; Mackey, 1999) strongly suggest students actively participate in interaction for question formation to develop. Mackey and Philip look at the effects of negotiated interaction, in this

case recasts, on the production and development of question forms. They summarize their findings as: “learners at higher developmental levels who participated in interaction with intensive recasts showed a greater increase in structures at higher developmental levels than learners who participated in interaction without intensive recasts” (p. 351). In addition, the findings support Pienemann’s teachability hypothesis (as cited in Mackey & Philip): the group that was both ready and received recasts developed the most. This study then suggests that although learners do not incorporate recasts in their immediate responses, recasts may be beneficial for short term interlanguage development.

Looking at a slightly different focus, Mackey (1999) aims to test Long’s interaction hypothesis that claims “taking part in interaction can facilitate second language development” (p. 565). Her findings show that conversational interaction did facilitate second language development, which gives empirical support to Long’s hypothesis. In her findings, students who actively participated in the interaction increased their stage level, and produced more frequent higher level structures. Also, the increase in developmentally more advanced structures was not an immediate effect, but a delayed one. This implies that learners may hold features in memory until they are developmentally ready (as noted by Gass, 2002). It also implies that teachers could actually engage learners with the particular structures again and again in different contexts/tasks.

Swain’s (1985) output hypothesis also supports the use of task-based activities in the second language classroom. This hypothesis claims that through the process of producing language (output), learners may be forced to focus on the syntax and morphology of the target language and then formulate hypothesis about it. Swain (2001) reiterates her three proposed functions of output or language production in second language learning: “to promote noticing, to formulate and test hypotheses, and to reflect on language use through metatalk” (p. 48). Thus while producing language, learners may become involved in negotiation with their interlocutors and get feedback from them. This interaction provides an opportunity for learners to modify their utterances.

In sum, interaction with all its features, resulting from doing communicative tasks, may benefit L2 learners. Thus it is important to create tasks “that provide learners with opportunities to engage in meaningful interaction and to direct their attention to linguistic form” (McDonough & Mackey, 2000). In this way, SLA can be facilitated. In other words, when learners are engaged in meaningful interaction and their attention is directed to specific linguistic form, learning may take place.

## **LINGUISTIC AND INTERACTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS PROMOTING SLA**

Elaborating the previous section, this section discusses the linguistic/input and interactional/conversational characteristics of the meaningful oral exchanges between or among learners that may differentially promote second language learning. Here the linguistic and interactional characteristics are also called input and interaction modifications respectively. Basically all the input and interactional modifications function to promote communication, to establish an affective bond, to implicitly (through input) or explicitly teach the target language (Hatch, 1983), or several of these at once. The adjustments made by the native or near native speakers when addressing learners can make communication possible because the language becomes comprehensible for the learners. In addition, as the negotiation of meaning between the two occurs, a special affective bond may be established which may support language learning.

### **Input and Interaction Modifications**

Studies describing the language addressed to language learners have shown that the linguistic environment of second language learners is rich in modifications (Chaudron, 1988; Hatch, 1983; Gass & Madden, 1985; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991). In this case, the linguistic environment includes not only the real-world interaction, but also L2 classroom interaction which is mainly generated from communicative tasks. A great deal of research, inspired by the importance of oral language input to first language development, has looked at native speakers' language modifications and conversational interaction patterns to non-native speakers both inside and outside the classroom (Wesche, 1994). Among these types of input to language learners, foreigner talk (i.e. a cover term for modifications made by proficient- native or near native- interlocutors when communicating with language learners) and interlanguage talk (among learners) are of particular interest. Ellis (1994) distinguished ungrammatical foreigner talk (as studied by Ferguson, 1971) from grammatical foreigner talk (as found in language teacher talk). Foreigner talk and interlanguage talk are common in the classroom context and are considered important sources of second language input for language development.

The modifications during interaction are used primarily to make language comprehensible so that communication can take place. Wesche (1994) summa-

rizes the kinds of native speakers' modifications which have been identified at all levels of the communication system and groups them into four main categories as follow:

**Speech rate, phonology, and prosody:** Native speakers tend to speak more slowly to lower proficiency non-native speakers, using more frequent and longer pauses. This results in better articulation with full vowel forms and consonant cluster production, and fewer contractions, thus allowing processing time for learners. Learners' attention may thus be directed to important content words.

**Morphology and syntax:** Generally, foreigner discourse utterances are grammatically well-formed but tend to be shorter and syntactically less complex than those directed to native speakers. Canonical word order and left dislocations to highlight topics are used more frequently, and certain tenses are avoided. These morphological and syntactical adjustments make language easier for learners to process.

**Vocabulary:** The words used tend to be more frequent, neutral, and concrete, avoiding idioms and slang. Noun forms are often used where pronouns would be used with proficient speakers. The vocabulary is less varied and includes a high use of copula forms and restatements. These modifications help learners recognize the important words, allowing more processing time for identifying meaning and relationships among words.

**Discourse:** There are two main categories of modifications at the discourse level, characterizing one-way (transmission) vs. two-way (interaction) discourse. Several identified features are the use of questions as topic initiating moves and of repetitions and paraphrases which may help learners' comprehension.

With the exception of discourse, the other categories are considered as input/linguistic modifications.

Many of these formal characteristics of foreigner talk are also found in interlanguage talk (Ellis, 1994). However, as may be expected, interlanguage talk tends to be less grammatical than teacher talk. On the other hand, interlanguage talk among learners creates more opportunities for negotiating meaning (Pica & Doughty, 1985), and communicative tasks serve this purpose. Such opportunities provide learners with practice using the target language and receiving feedback. This may help develop learners' linguistic and strategic competence, and facilitate their language acquisition. Pica, Lincoln-Porter, Paninos, and Linnell (1996), in their report on the effect of second language learners' interaction with other learners compared to that with native speakers, with respect to their input, output, and

feedback needs, suggest both caution and optimism towards learners' interaction in the classroom because it does not provide as much modified input and feedback as the native speakers.

Ellis (1994) indicates three general processes which researchers believe underlie the modifications in grammatical foreigner talk: simplification, regularization, and elaboration. While simplification entails an attempt on the part of the native speakers to use simplified forms, regularization and elaboration are intended to simplify the learners' task of processing the input. All these modifications occur as native speakers try to communicate with learners, and depend on their perception of the learners' abilities to understand as well as the learners' ages.

Obviously, modifications can be classified into input/linguistic modifications and interactional modifications. The linguistic modifications, presented earlier which range from the phonological to syntactic features, can aid comprehension and help learners to participate in a conversation (Gass, 2002). However, Long (1983) points out that the interactional modifications are more important because they are more extensive and more consistently occur. The interactional modifications can be divided into discourse management or strategies whose purpose is to avoid communication problems, and discourse repair or tactics whose purpose is to repair the discourse when communication breaks down. Ellis (1994) elaborates on these two distinctions. Discourse management includes the amount and type of information communicated, use of questions, here-and-now orientation, comprehension checks, and self-repetition by the proficient interlocutor. Discourse repair takes the form of negotiation of meaning, including requests for clarification, confirmation, self and other repetitions, self and other corrections, and feedback.

Gass (2002) further asserts the importance of negotiation through which "the learner may direct attention to an area of the target language (1) about which she or he may be entertaining a hypothesis (or about which she or he is trying to formulate a hypothesis), or (2) about which she or he has no information" (p. 175). In this way, learning can occur during a conversation or a communicative task when learners negotiate meaning in their interaction or receive feedback about their production. This kind of learning, as Gass points out, can be in the form of on the spot learning which is taken place immediately, or delayed learning which needs some time to occur.

Looking at negotiation from a different angle, Lyster (2002) differentiates negotiation of meaning from negotiation of form, arguing that the latter is used by teachers intentionally to draw learners' attention on non-target form which serves



“as prompts for students to self-repair” (p. 382). In other words, teachers often use negotiation of form to feign incomprehension in order to push students to self-correct. Negotiation of form includes clarification requests, repetition, metalinguistic clues, and elicitation. Clarification requests and repetition are also identified as negotiation of meaning. Lyster further argues for negotiation of form because it challenges students to “draw on their own linguistic resources [which are] more likely to contribute to the continued development of target language proficiency as well as learner autonomy” (p.394).

### **Attention, Comprehension, and Production**

Neither negotiation of meaning, nor negotiation of form is facilitative in second language development without attention or noticing of the target language from the part of the learner. As Gass (2002) points out, for interaction to have an effect, “the learner must notice that his or her conversational partner is explicitly or implicitly making a correction” (p. 178). Thus, there must be a part of the language, either the pronunciation, vocabulary, or syntax that triggers learners’ attention during an interaction that becomes an initial step for learning. The role of attention is central to an understanding of L2 development and consequently is crucial for instruction. As Schmidt (2001) states, “the crucial evidence that triggers changes in the unconscious system must be attended” (p. 6). Reviewing other studies, he elaborates that attention to input is necessary for storage and hypothesis formulation/testing since it allows learners to see a gap in their language production.

However, attention is only the initial part of L2 development. Gass & Selinker (1994) claim that not all input, even that which is comprehended, becomes intake. In their input processing framework, the initial step for input to be used is called apperception, in which learners notice a new linguistic form that relates to prior knowledge. Some other factors influencing the noticing process are frequency, affect, and attention. After learners notice the input, they should be able to analyze it further for comprehension. Here, a distinction should be made between comprehensible input which is controlled by the interlocutor who provides input, and comprehended input which is learner-controlled. For any of the comprehended input to become intake, learners must process it further for linguistic assimilation. Gass & Selinker refer to intake as “the mental activity that mediates between input and grammar.” (p. 302). Intake then is integrated either into learners’

L2 language grammar or, unanalysed, into their long term memory storage, to be produced later on as output.

In other words, learners need to pay attention to input first before comprehension and production can take place. Then, gradually through experience, elaboration, and practice, they will internalize the input, or some part or representation of it, and eventually be able to retrieve it automatically. Furthermore, output that can also serve as new input is required for L2 learning because production forces learners to pay attention to the syntax of the target language (Swain, 1985). Swain and Lapkin's (1998) and Swain's (2001) studies provide evidence of language learning using a jigsaw task and collaborative tasks, respectively. In both studies, while working together in collaborative writing, the students encountered linguistic problems and tried to solve them through negotiation. In this way, the students could use their knowledge about the language for their output, "allowing them to reflect on it, revise it, and apply it" (2001: 44). Such tasks provide students with learning opportunities as they notice gaps, externalize their knowledge, and participate actively.

As can be seen, there is much more to language development than attention, though it is an essential initial step for language learning. As Gass (2002) states, "A contrast must be attended to, or, in SLA parlance, a gap must be noticed. And conversation provides a forum for the contrast to be detected, especially when the erroneous form and a correct one are in immediate juxtaposition" (p. 180). In other words, interaction with its linguistic and interactional characteristics during communicative tasks helps learners to see a difference in their language production that may create a necessary condition for second language learning. However, further research attempting to empirically link negotiation/interaction and acquisition is necessary (Skehan & Foster, 2001). With the English as a foreign language (EFL) context in mind, De Bot (2001) suggests that research should be conducted on "what, if any, interaction takes place in real L2 classrooms and what effect that interaction has on the ongoing process of language acquisition" (p. 603).

One of the few studies conducted in EFL settings is that of Mayo and Pica (2000). Their study addresses issues dealing with the EFL classroom "as an environment that promotes input, feedback and the production of output for second language (L2) learning" (p.1). Using two communication tasks of information gap and decision making with advanced adult learners, their findings supported the EFL classroom as a learning environment. A more recent study by Pinter (2007) also shows some benefits of peer-peer interaction as two 10-year-old children with

very low level of competence completed a spot-the-differences task in an EFL context in Hungary. However, these two studies were conducted in laboratory settings. As Hasan (2006) points out, there is surprisingly very little research to date conducted in classroom EFL settings looking at the performance of non-native speaker/ non-native speaker (NNS-NNS) discourse using communicative tasks. Such research will then continue to evaluate the importance of interaction in task-based activities in second language learning, and suggest its implication for teaching.

## CONCLUSION

The use of communicative tasks is one way of promoting L2 learning as students are encouraged to interact meaningfully and pay attention to the linguistic form while doing tasks which can create a necessary condition for SLA. Interaction during well-designed communicative tasks can help students not only to comprehend the target language, but also to produce it. In this way, learning may take place through interaction with a number of mechanisms, one of which is attention. Using communicative tasks will provide students with opportunities for learning because they encourage negotiation of meaning that in turn facilitate acquisition.

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