Chapter 32
Integrating Technology–Enhanced Student Self–Regulated Tasks into University Chinese Language Course

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the implementation of a semester-long task in a university lower intermediate Chinese language course. Web-based podcasting technology, ChinesePod, was utilized to assist this implementation. The first part of this paper focuses on the task design informed by frameworks proposed in the literature. The second half of the paper presents and analyses data collected from an end-of-course questionnaire, semi-structured student interviews, and the written scripts of student self-made plays and videos of their performance of the play. The results reveal that the students differ in their perceptions of the task and the ways they approach it. This in turn leads to a quality difference in their performance of the task. This study highlights the importance of careful task design, recognition of individual learning styles and constant rapport with students, especially when student self-regulated tasks are implemented.

INTRODUCTION

In the past 20 years, task-based language teaching (TBLT) has drawn the increasing attention of language researchers and classroom teachers. With its "analytic" syllabuses claimed to be more effective than traditional "synthetic" (Wilkins, 1976) lexical, structural and notional/functional syllabuses (Long & Crookes, 1992), TBLT focuses on experiential learning and is intended to result in more efficient, meaning-focused communication in language learning (Ellis, 2003; Long & Crookes, 1992; Nunan, 2004). However, the adoption of TBLT in classrooms, especially in foreign language (FL) education settings, has been slow and may take various forms not necessarily consistent with the conventional descriptions of syllabuses presented in the literature (Wette, 2009). The inflexible of curriculum and large class size in tertiary education make it difficult to implement

a "strong version" (Skehan, 2009) of TBLT. The instability of language teaching staff, in addition to lack of funding and insufficient teaching hours, also adds to the difficulty.

The rapid integration of technology into language teaching seems to offer promise, but whether this promise can be fulfilled calls for empirical evidence. This paper reports on a study that investigates the implementation of a semester-long task supported by a web-based podcasting technology, ChinesePod, in a university lower intermediate Chinese language course. The paper starts with a discussion of the design and implementation considerations based on frameworks proposed in the literature. It then presents findings with regard to the effectiveness of the implementation of the task from the student point of view followed by a discussion about the implications of the task for FL pedagogy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Task and Task-Based Language Teaching

Ellis (2003) emphasizes the central role tasks play in both second language acquisition (SLA) and in language pedagogy. According to Ellis, the task-based approach draws so much attention because it addresses pedagogical issues such as "the role of meaning-based activity, the need for more learner-centred curricula, the importance of affective factors, the contribution of learner-training, and the need for some focus-on-form" (p.33). Needless to say, these issues are highly relevant in the daily practice of all classroom teachers.

In the literature, various definitions of a task are available (see Ellis, 2003; Van den Branden, 2006). While full agreement has not been reached, two common characteristics of a task have been identified: focus on meaning rather than form; and the use of communicative language (Nunan, 2004).

A task may or may not result in the intended outcome; that is, a communicative learning task may not necessarily generate meaning-focused communication (Ellis, 2003). In fact, there frequently tends to be a disparity between the intended learning outcome and what the learners actually achieve from completing the task (Breen, 1987). The learning outcome, to a large extent, depends upon how individual learners perceive and approach the task (Breen, 1987; Nunan, 2004).

In Seedhouse (1999), an analysis of the task-based interaction transcripts of 330 Second Language (L2) lessons or fragments of lessons finds that the turn-taking system is constrained by the nature of the task and also finds a tendency toward minimalisation and indexicality, which does not support the claimed benefits of task-based interaction.

Therefore, Ellis (2003) is justified in his assertion that "[one] of the goals of task-based research is to establish whether the predictions made by designers are actually borne out" (p.5). Ellis (2003) makes the distinction between the outcome and the aim of a task, which is useful for evaluating task performance. The actual language used during the task performance should be examined carefully to determine whether a task results in a successful outcome; in other words, researchers need to examine whether the "cognitive and linguistic processes" have generated the language use to "promote language learning" (Ellis, 2003, p.8) during the task performance.

Two forms of task-based approach are identified in the present literature. Skehan (1996; 2009) draws a distinction between the *strong* and the *weak* form of a task-based approach. The strong form considers tasks as a unit of language teaching and holds that language acquisition can result from performing these meaning-focused tasks. The weak form of a task-based approach considers that tasks are necessary for language teaching but not sufficient.

Similarly, Ellis (2003) describes two ways of using tasks in language teaching, namely *task-*

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