

書評

BOOK REVIEW

Task-based Language Learning and Teaching

ELLIS, Rod / New York: Oxford, 2003. pp. viii + 387.

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“Task” has maintained its central role in second language (L2) teaching as well as second language acquisition (SLA) research. In L2 classrooms, tasks are used as a tool for creating maximal language conditions where communication takes place. Providing learners with as many opportunities to communicate as possible is crucial since it is presumed that L2 learners develop their interlanguage systems through engaging in meaning comprehension and production. In SLA research, tasks serve as an instrument for investigating the process of L2 acquisition. Researchers design various tasks to elicit a wide range of language data for further examinations. In addition, responding to the increasing recognition of the effect of tasks on L2 acquisition, they investigate the direct relationship between a task and acquisition to find out to what extent a task affects L2 acquisition. In this case, a task becomes a construct in its own right.

Rod Ellis, who has been engaging in SLA research over 20 years as a leading pioneer, wrote this book to delineate the roles and functions of a task in SLA research and teaching. By doing so, he attempts to establish bridges between SLA and language pedagogy since a task is the common construct in the two fields.

In the book, the use of the term ‘task’ is restricted to activities where meaning is primary, which excludes any other activities where focus is placed on forms in isolation. However, throughout the text, he emphasizes the necessity to combine focus on meaning and focus on form. While L2 learners are mainly involved in message conveyance, their peripheral attention needs to be directed at a linguistic code in some contexts. There are a variety of pedagogical suggestions regarding how to integrate attention to form into meaning-focused language use contexts in the book. Such emphasis seems to be stimulated by the accumulating findings that the total exclusion of linguistic forms results in incomplete L2 acquisition, possibly, fossilization.

The book, consisting of 10 chapters, examines task-based research and theories that have informed this research. It covers all kinds of topics relating to SLA research, including sociocultural theory and task-based assessment. What is particularly interesting is the accounts of the cognitive dimension of tasks, which has gained growing attention from researchers in the field. Ellis suggests that the nature of internal processes involved in task performance be highlighted more. This is because “tasks clearly do involve

cognitive processes such as selecting, reasoning, classifying, sequencing information, and transforming information from one form of representation to another” (7). It is reasonable to assume that the way in which L2 learners process incoming input is largely influenced by the demands imposed by tasks. That is, tasks constrain the performance of learners; they affect what linguistic structures learners have to use or to which forms they pay attention, while allowing them the final decision. The capacity for processing information is limited in a sense that L2 learners cannot pay simultaneous attention to both form and meaning. Referring to Level’s Production Model, Ellis argues that L2 learners have to struggle to conceptualize, formulate, and articulate messages. More attention to one aspect of production implies less attention to others. It is often the case that attention to meaning is priority over attention to form in communication. Accuracy and complexity are competing factors; however, task design variables can manipulate the degrees of cognitive demands that are posed on learners. Ellis unveils in this book important issues regarding how internal cognitive processes are affected by types of tasks and in turn to what extent acquisition is promoted or inhibited through tasks. The way of implementation and the sequencing of tasks may also play a part in to what extent intake is internalized.

Among all chapters, Chapter 7 and 8 are worth reading particularly for language teachers. Chapter 7 provides a useful framework for the task-based course design. It presents detailed procedures to design a task; teachers need to classify tasks in terms of type, determine their thematic content, specify features of language, and then sequence them concerning the proficiency levels of learners. Chapter 8 presents clear guidelines with respect to how activities in the syllabus can be converted into actual lessons and how teachers and learners are involved in the lessons. These frameworks are of obvious advantage to both teachers and researchers in designing tasks.

A variety of tasks are used in research and classrooms according to each purpose. Tasks are so commonly used that teachers and researchers may not notice the significance of it. Recognizing the fact that a task is a primary means by which L2 development progresses, researchers and teachers need to create the tasks that help promote language learning. The book reviewed in here is worthwhile in that it addresses crucial issues relating to a task design that needs to be deeply concerned. This is also a useful introduction book for those who begin to conduct research into task-based teaching.