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Measuring the effectiveness of a task-based spoken EAP instructional sequence

1. Introduction

Within the field of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), task-based language teaching (TBLT) is commonly considered best-practice, with broad claims being made that it promotes learning and replicates the academic discourse community (Gillet/Wray 2006: 6-7; Richards/Rogers 2001; Feez 1998; Charles 1996), promotes critical-thinking (Alexander et al 2008: 267), and is particularly suitable for high-level learners (Williams 2001; Long/Porter 1985). However, there are also those who question its general utility (e.g. Bruton 2002, 2010; Swan 2005), arguing that it does not promote language development as much as its supporters claim.

With regard to actually measuring the effectiveness of a TBLT approach in an EAP context, however, there has, thus far, only been limited, almost exclusively qualitative, research related largely to the effectiveness of entire, task-based EAP courses (Gillet/Wray (eds) 2006; Storch/Tapper 2009), using questionnaires, interviews or pre- and post-course tests. However, there has as yet been no study which has attempted to link classroom activity directly to outcomes in a quantifiable manner, clearly desirable if it is to be accurately determined whether and how learning actually takes place. This is precisely what this research project intends to do, in order to contribute to the debate on whether TBLT deserves its 'best-practice' label in the EAP context.

The focus of the analysis in this study is a task-based sequence of spoken classroom debates on the topic of the 'Israeli-Palestinian conflict', conducted by a group of mixed-nationality B2+-level (see Council of Europe, 2008) university students as part of an EAP course in 'English for Politics and Economics' at the Humboldt University Language Centre, Berlin. The aforementioned sequence of debates conforms to Ellis' (2009: 223) requirements for 'tasks' in that each discussion as well as the whole has a "... clearly-defined outcome other than the use of language ..." (in this case, the objective of agreeing on

proposals aiming to solve the conflict), the students "...largely have to rely on their own resources...", and the "...primary focus is on 'meaning'..." In more detail, this 'instructional sequence' (a term borrowed from Lynch 1996) involved an initial student debate (T1), followed by a 'focus-on-form' phase (FoF, in which students compared their performance in T1 with that of native speakers conducting a debate on the same topic) and a second, similar, student debate (T2). All three phases were digitally recorded for analysis. Structuring the sequence in such a way meant that students performed tasks and received input at the $i+1$ level (Krashen 1982), with possibilities to identify the language that they needed themselves (Schmidt 1990) and to try it out i.e. 'negotiate meaning' (Long 1983) in the final debate, thereby testing the key theories underpinning TBLT.

In order to quantitatively determine the effectiveness of this task-based spoken EAP instructional sequence, lexical-analysis software was used to measure the number and length of all new 'linguistic items' (words and lexicogrammatical chunks) from the FoF which were reused by students in T2, thereby directly connecting any linguistic gains to classroom activity.

2. Methods

For the debates, the class was divided into two groups, one to put forward the Palestinian viewpoints and the other the Israeli arguments. In order to obtain a balanced mix of individual variables for analysis, the groups were divided as equally as possible in terms of C-(entrance) test score, nationality, gender, and the teacher's view of their motivation.

With the aim of providing 'interactional authenticity' (Bachman 1990) to promote natural use of language appropriate to an academic context, prior to the initial debate, the students were asked to complete background reading and viewing assignments on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict related to ten key areas and, in their groups, to share ideas with regard to these.

In the first debate (T1), lasting just under one hour, the ten areas were discussed in turn, with all students being allowed to contribute at any time. My role was limited to chairing the discussion although, on occasion, I 'recast' what I judged to be important language mistakes by providing the correct version.

Following the initial debate, for homework, was the 'focus-on-form' stage, in which the students listened to a recording and looked at the transcript of

First of all, I believe that, in such a course as the one mentioned here, two debates are not enough if developing students' language skills in as comprehensive a manner as possible is the goal. Although, clearly, some gains can be made (as demonstrated here), it would be much more beneficial to have a course consisting of a series of debates, ideally on similar topics (but not necessarily the same, and chosen by the students in order to increase motivation), encouraging re-use of the same kind of debating language. As an extension of the work begun here, I would suggest maintaining the structure of the instructional sequence (including native-speaker or C2-level debates as focuses-on-form) but, for example, allowing students to use their 'useful language' documents (as a further focus-on-form) in a second debate, but not in a third. It would be interesting to discover whether such a possibility improved students' language use substantially more than the sequence used in this research. To complement this, based on the high degrees of correlation between the number of chunks retained by individuals and their C-test scores and numbers of words spoken, I would also suggest that teachers 'push' (see Swain 1985) students to use more sophisticated language, to avoid short turns, and encourage the linguistically weaker ones to speak more, through the introduction of clear assessment criteria and feedback, further focuses-on-form, imposition of a more rigid debating structure and increased delegation.

To sum up, in this study, linguistic gains were clearly made through use of a task-based instructional sequence, but I would suggest that, in a future course of this nature, by implementing the above recommendations emerging from this research, further gains in language proficiency can be made from classroom activity using such a task-based approach.

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APPENDIX: List of new 4+-word strings reoccurring in T2

Strings are listed as number of words, string (frequencies in FoF, T2), speaker (non-contiguous strings plus those within similar native-speaker phrases are highlighted in italics). Strings appear ranked in order of i. length (number of words reused), ii. frequency in FoF, iii. frequency in T2 (as a new occurrence), iv. (part-)recurring in FoF (denoted by #), v. alphabetical order. (strings also occurring in T1 but reused by (a) different student(s) are ranked last and denoted by *)

11

What else could (there) be (as) the capital of the new Palestinian state? (1,1) PD #

10

the Palestinian(s) are very much in favour of/for a two-state solution (1,1) PD #

Essentially/basicly we are willing to accept the/a Israeli right to exist, but (1,1) PD

9

parts of Jerusalem where there is an Arab majority (1,1) IF

8

to reduce the size of the Israeli state (1,1) PB

7

we didn't talk about this but (1,1) IF

The U.S. is very much/at first a pro-Israeli state and (1,1) PD

6

correct me if I'm wrong (1,1) PO

return back behind/to the borders of 1967 / the nineteen hundred sixty-seven (1,1) PD

of the State of Israel and (1,1) PB *

5

in the State of Israel (2,2) IF IMI #

to take the first step (2,1) IMI #

what more do you want (2,1) IF #

accept our right to exist (1,2) PD

side would be willing to (1,1) PB #

the/a two-state solution is (not) a solution (1,1) PD #

there will be no terrorist attacks / terrorism (1,1) PO #

things that happened in Europe (1,1) PD #

right to exist but we (1,1) PD

settlements in the west bank (1,1) IMA

the Israelis are willing to (1,1) PB