

Instructed SLA and Task-Based Language Teaching

Haimei Sun

Teachers College, Columbia University

Although second language acquisition (SLA) and language teaching are two distinct fields, an increasing number of classroom-based SLA research on the effectiveness of different types of instruction, such as focus on forms, focus on meaning, and focus on form (see Norris & Ortega, 2000 for a review), corrective feedback (e.g., Lyster & Ranta, 1997), input enhancement (e.g., White, 1998), etc., has brought about a burgeoning subfield of SLA known as Instructed SLA (ISLA). ISLA, which is often pitted against naturalistic SLA, “occurs in formal settings where language is intentionally taught and intentionally learned – within a limited amount of time” (Spada, 2015, p. 71). Given ISLA’s immediate and potential relevance to second language (L2) pedagogy, Long (2014) made the first attempt to formulate a cognitive-interactionist theory of ISLA. In what follows, this theory will first be presented and then discussed in relation to its significance to and implications for task-based language teaching (TBLT) and syllabus design.

The cognitive-interactionist theory of ISLA outlines four fundamental phenomena pertinent to adult SLA, along with appropriate explanations for each (Long, 2014). The first two phenomena concern the observations that purely incidental and implicit child first language acquisition is invariably successful whereas adult SLA is highly variable and largely unsuccessful. One possible explanation is that adults are subject to maturational constraints, which are “defined in terms of the onset and offset of special language-learning mechanisms that only operate when biologically scheduled to do so” (Doughty, 2012, p. 275). While language specific learning mechanisms may enable children to *naturally* and *automatically* pick up their mother tongue through mere exposure, they perhaps no longer function in the same way for adult learners who often have to fight against their L1-attuned processing systems and resort to effortful, explicit, and analytic processing of L2 input. Moreover, adults are partially ‘disabled’ language learners in that they are entrenched in their L1 learned cues and attention, with a decreased capacity for implicit learning, instance learning in particular.

The third phenomenon is that linguistic features that are infrequent, perceptually non-salient, semantically opaque, and/or communicatively redundant tend to be “fragile”, and thus learned late or never fully learned. As a consequence, it seems unrealistic for late starters to rely solely upon the implicit learning mode to acquire such features even though implicit learning still remains the default learning mechanism. Long (2014) instead argues that explicit learning is required to enhance implicit learning in such a way that learners attend to non-salient linguistic features and notice the gaps between their own interlanguage systems and the target input, thus fostering new form-meaning-function connections. The importance of noticing effects also features in the Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996), which posits that during negotiation for meaning, learners’ internally or externally generated attention may be temporarily drawn to problematic linguistic codes; interaction therefore provides a platform where input, feedback, negotiation, and output can work seamlessly with one another. The last phenomenon concerns inter- and intra-learner variability in L2 ultimate attainment within and across linguistic domains, due largely to individual differences and linguistic differences such as perceptual saliency, input sensitivity, etc.

Those aforementioned fundamental observations of SLA, which the ISLA theory needs to address, have collectively motivated and informed the advancement of a researched pedagogy

known as Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). TBLT attempts to accommodate individual learners' psycholinguistic and communicative needs and to enable them to develop a functional competence in the target language. Within this framework, a task, in lieu of discrete linguistic items, serves as a meaningful unit of analysis in curriculum and syllabus design. Through a needs analysis, learners' needs are first identified and used to derive pertinent pedagogical tasks and syllabus content. Tasks also function as a vehicle "for the presentation of appropriate target language samples for learners – input which they will inevitably reshape via applications of general cognitive processing capacities – and for the delivery of comprehension and production opportunities of negotiable difficulty" (Long & Crookes, 1992, p. 43). A task-based syllabus is thus analytic in nature in that it presents target language samples holistically as they would be employed in real-world communication.

However, unlike analytic syllabi, which are premised on the assumption that adult L2 learners still possess the same processing capacity for implicit and incidental learning as they acquire their first language, a task-based syllabus compensates for their processing constraints by incorporating an essential focus on form component that draws their attention overtly or covertly to non-salient linguistic codes that might otherwise go unattended or unnoticed. TBLT therefore stands a better chance of maximizing learners' default implicit learning mechanisms while not neglecting the necessity for explicit learning. Furthermore, a task-based approach caters to learners' individual differences by allowing them to attend to and process input that is relevant to and learnable by them at a particular moment of instruction.

As a pedagogy grounded in SLA and ISLA theory and empirical findings, the potential influence of TBLT on both L2 teaching and research is enormous, particularly with respect to Robinson's (2001) triadic componential framework, which differentiates between cognitive, interactional and ability requirements demands, with each corresponding to *task complexity*, *task conditions* and *task difficulty*. Of these categories, task complexity in particular needs to be distinguished from task difficulty in that the former, intrinsic to the task itself, relates to learners' cognitive factors, contributing to intra-learner variation, whereas the latter concerns learners' perceptions of task demands, which are influenced by learners' affective stances and aptitude, hence leading to inter-learner variation. Given this distinction, Robinson argues that task complexity should be the sole criterion for sequencing pedagogical tasks. This line of research on task sequencing, coupled with Long's (2014) framework of needs analysis, provides insightful guidelines for designing task-based language teaching materials and syllabi. Although this line of research has not yet resulted in large-scale reform in textbook and curriculum design across the globe (due partially to practical and resource constraints), the growing number of empirical studies examining task complexity and sequencing and the implementation of TBLT by practitioners are likely to yield highly promising results in the long run.

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Haimei Sun is a doctoral student in Applied Linguistics at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her scholarly interests center on second language acquisition in general and task-based language teaching and learning, and second language reading in particular. Correspondence should be sent to Haimei Sun, 1230 Amsterdam Ave. Apt. 637 New York, NY 10027. Email: hs2700@tc.columbia.edu