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Stimulating learner autonomy in English language education : a curriculum innovation study in a Vietnamese context

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CHAPTER 4

LEARNER AUTONOMY AND COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE: PARAMETERS FOR A CURRICULUM

In chapter 3, I presented the concept of learner autonomy related to foreign language learning. In this chapter, I will focus on developing learners' communicative competence. The first section reviews the communicative competence framework. The second section moves to the teaching methods that aim to develop learners' communicative competence. The third section concludes which teaching method fits the aim of developing communicative competence and both learner autonomy and communicative competence the best. The fourth section summarizes the parameters of a curriculum aiming at developing learner autonomy and communicative competence.

1. THE COMPONENTS OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

Foreign language teaching has undergone remarkable changes, from the audio-lingual to communicative language teaching and then task-based language learning. During the late 1940s and the 1950s, the audio-lingual method took the dominant status in the field. This method focuses on language as a structured system of grammatical patterns and aims to have students produce formally correct sentences. As a result, students might produce correct linguistic structures acquired through practice (i.e., repetition) or might even show to master the language system. However, this production or mastery does not guarantee an appropriate use in real-life communication (Widdowson, 1978). Knowledge of the language system defined by Chomsky (1965) as linguistic competence does not suffice for adequate communication. Linguistic competence does not necessarily ensure satisfactory performance.

Hymes (1979) claimed that language users need more than just linguistic competence to communicate effectively. Speakers need to know how members of a speech community use the target language to accomplish their purposes. He takes the social context of language use (i.e., appropriateness) into consideration and emphasizes the language learners' ability (i.e., identifying if something in language use is possible, feasible and accepted) rather than their underlying knowledge. Both the social context of language use and language learners' ability that Hymes (ibid.) indicated were not covered in Chomsky's (ibid.) linguistic competence.

Using Chomsky's (1965) linguistic competence and Hymes' (1979) component of appropriateness of language use in social contexts as a starting point, Canale and Swain (1980) describe communicative competence as the underlying system of knowledge and skills required for communication. Canale's (1983) communicative competence includes four components: *Grammatical, socio-linguistic, discourse* and

strategic competence. Grammatical competence is from Chomsky's (1965) formulation of linguistic competence, which reflects the knowledge of vocabulary and rules of word formation, pronunciation and spelling and sentence formation. Sociolinguistic competence is based on Hymes' (ibid.) appropriateness of language use in social contexts. Discourse competence refers to the ability to handle language beyond the level of the sentence and to understand the rules of discourse (Canale, 1983). Discourse competence is manifested in

“(...) an understanding of how spoken and written texts are organized and how to make inferences which recover the underlying meaning of what has been said and the connection between utterances” (Skehan, 1998: 158).

Strategic competence, a compensatory strategy, is activated when other competences fail to cope with situations such as lack of words or structures for communication. Strategic competence does not deal with how ongoing and ordinary communication is achieved. It emphasizes language use when communication breaks down.

This communicative competence model (Swain & Canale; Canale) has been further developed by Bachman (1990) and Bachman and Palmer (1996). They labeled communicative competence as *language competence*, consisting of two main components: Organizational competence (grammatical and textual competences) and pragmatic competence (illocutionary and socio-linguistic competence). Bachman's (ibid.) language competence model includes more variables than Swain and Canale's (ibid.) model. First, textual competence (closely related to Canale and Swain's discourse competence) together with grammatical competence as part of organizational competence is included. Second, a more complex account of pragmatic competence is encompassed – illocutionary (ideational and heuristic functions) competence and knowledge of appropriate language use in different social contexts –. Third, strategic competence is not seen as “compensation”. This is the most remarkable evolution in Bachman's (ibid.) model: *strategic competence* is manifested by a *set of meta-cognitive skills*, which include the abilities to determine communicative goals, assess communicative resources, plan communication and execute this communication (Skehan, 1998).

What makes Bachman's model more comprehensive than Canale and Swain's (ibid.) is *the transition from a language use model to a language use and language learning model, which is reflected in the construct embodied in the component of strategic competence*. Instead of considering strategic competence as a cognitive activity (i.e., strategy of compensation), strategic competence is understood as the ability to perform meta-cognitive activities such as planning, monitoring and self-evaluating language performances, which is termed *strategic language learning* by Oostdam & Rijlaarsdam (1995). The ability to use meta-cognitive activities is a manifestation of autonomous learners, who are better language learners and users (Little, 2000a).

In my view, *a competent language learner is one who, in addition to the ability to use the target language in a socially appropriate way, is able to use meta-cognitive activities to adjust future language performances*. In Rijlaarsdam's (2002) words, she is able to use the target language to learn the language, to learn *how to learn* the language (how to plan, execute, monitor and evaluate communicative tasks

and language acquisition processes) and to learn how to transfer (i.e., the application of personal language experience to real-life communicative situations and transfer of strategies learned from their classroom experiences for monitoring and evaluating their own task execution and language learning).

During the last forty years, the theoretical framework of communicative competence has been evolved, illustrating a range of abilities required of language learners as language users to operate competently. The pedagogical question is what language teaching methods aim at developing communicative competence and how they do that.

2. DEVELOPING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

The two instructional methods that focus on developing learners' communicative competence are Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-based Language Learning (TBLL).

To describe different instructional methods, we apply distinctions made by Richards and Rodgers (2001). Any language teaching method is theoretically related to an approach, organizationally determined by a design and practically recognized in the procedure (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). *Approach* refers to the nature of language learning. *Design* is an instructional system derived from the approach, and *procedure* is the manifestation of the approach and the design in the classroom.

2.1 *Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)*

CLT views language as a system for the expression of meaning and as the primary function of language interaction and communication (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Richards & Rogers, 2001). Therefore, CLT aims at developing communicative competence in language teaching and learning (Brown, 2000; Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Savignon, 2002). The following sections will discuss the approach, design and procedure of CLT.

2.1.1 *Approach*

In traditional classrooms, the focus is on *grammatical competence*. However, acquisition of linguistic competence does not guarantee the subsequent acquisition of communicative competence in a language. Overemphasizing drills and exercises for the reception and production of sentences even tend to hinder the development of communicative competence (Widdowson, 1989). The outcomes of traditional classrooms are likely to produce structurally competent but communicatively incompetent students (Johnson & Morrow, 1981). This does not necessarily completely undermine the role of grammatical competence, because no language learner can become proficient in a language without developing a certain level of grammatical competence (Tarone & Yule, 1989). However, the provision of teaching grammar and teaching communication in a language course needs to be reconsidered. Too much emphasis on one at the expense of the other will bring about (1) fluency, ap-

propriateness but inaccuracy and (2) accuracy but inappropriateness and lack of fluency. For this reason, Littlewood (1981) proposes a certain kind of teaching grammar. He suggests the "pre-teaching" method in which students will concentrate on structural practice before going into communicative activities. We will discuss the validity of this "pre-teaching" method when reviewing the strengths and weaknesses of CLT in section 2.1.4 of this chapter.

Mastery of *socio-linguistic competence* entails mastery of speech act conventions and norms of stylistic appropriateness of language use (Tarone & Yule, 1989). Therefore, developing learners' socio-linguistic competence entails teaching them (1) the speech acts, and (2) the appropriateness of language use in different contexts. Teaching speech acts includes teaching the functional knowledge of language. A shortage of functional knowledge might cause misunderstanding of the meaning. The internal nature of language knowledge (functional knowledge) is best captured by detailing many usages to which the language can be put (Spolsky, 1989), so teaching students different functions of a language form (usages) is supposed to enhance students' performance in speech acts which might help avoid misunderstanding the meaning. Teaching learners the appropriateness of language use means teaching the cultural systems in which that target language is spoken. The same communicative act could be interpreted in different ways in different cultures. These different cultural meanings across languages cause problems for learners of the target language; learners make "culture mistakes" (Liao, 2000). Seelye (1994) suggests techniques to teach learners the culture of the language so that they become competent in their socio-linguistic use. First, students can be exposed to episodes of the target culture behavior and then reflect on these episodes, picking out what is considered "appropriate" in that culture. Second, students are expected to gather information on the differences language use in the cultures where the target language is spoken (e.g., British, American, Australian English ...) and share this with the class.

CLT assumes that the structure of the language reflects its functional and communicative use. The primary units of language are categories of functional and communicative meaning, as exemplified in discourse (Richards & Rogers, 2001). Teaching learners categories of functional and communicative meaning develops their *discourse competence*.

According to Canale and Swain (1980), *strategic competence* is a type of compensation for situations when language learners or users experience communication breakdowns. Learners employ strategic competence when they lack the linguistic resources required to express intended meanings. It is essential to train learners these strategies, even learners who have a high degree of grammatical competence. The two common proposals on how to teach students communication strategies put forward by Tarone and Yule (1989) are (1) learning by observing, then acting and (2) teaching strategies for later use. For the first approach, learners observe interactional exchanges to identify strategies the speakers employed and to practice them. The second approach is to teach students the strategies directly and explicitly so that they might use them when necessary.

2.1.2 Design

What are the language units in the syllabus? The CLT syllabus involves units of notional (i.e., the concepts and ideas language expresses) and functional (i.e., communicative functions of language) meaning of the language. Language structures embedding language notions and functions considered as language input are presented in communicative situations. Language structures are followed by communicative activities so that learners practice the language items under instruction. It can be seen that CLT integrates a communicative component into a traditional linguistic syllabus, so the value of grammatical explanations, error corrections and drills is recognized in teaching with CLT principles. It can be inferred that CLT differs from the traditional methods (grammar-translation, audio-lingual) in respect of *what* is taught, not *how* something is taught.

2.1.3 Procedure

CLT focuses on linguistic content, specified in notional and functional terms. In other words, CLT focuses on the practice of language use (Holliday, 1994). The methodological procedure "presentation-practice-production" (PPP) has been employed to teach learners such a practice of language use.

The three stages of PPP aim to develop declarative knowledge and convert declarative knowledge to procedural knowledge about and of the language, which is supposed to be used by learners in their "language production" stage and in real-life language use.

The first stage, *presentation* generally focuses – explicitly or implicitly – on the structure to maximize comprehension and internalization of the underlying rule. Following are *practice* activities in which learners would reproduce the language through conducting exercises provided by the teacher or the textbook. At the *production* stage, the learner is stimulated to use the structure they just have learned to produce language more or less spontaneously. Communication conducted in the production stage occurs in do-as-if situations.

2.1.4 Discussion

An apparent advantage of the notional and functional syllabus is that language structures or language functions can be systematically organized in a syllabus. A list of linguistic contents documenting which have been covered or will be covered in class sessions makes it easier for the teachers and learners to identify what should be tested. When teaching the notional and functional syllabus and applying the PPP, the content and procedures seem to be rehearsed. When the teachers enter the classroom, they know which topic they will cover and which steps they will follow. In Skehan's (1998) words, PPP provides teachers with procedures for maintaining control of the classroom, thus reinforcing their power over students, and the procedures themselves are eminently trainable. However, several studies showed that the notional-functional syllabus including the PPP instruction model have shown to be ineffective in developing communicative competence.

Long and Crooke (1992: 30-31) criticized the PPP by arguing that learners followed their built-in syllabuses (Corder, 1967 in Long & Crooke, 1992). Long and Crooke (*ibid.*) claimed that notional or functional syllabuses do not work because the acquisition of a notion or function in language in fact is the acquisition of grammatical structure. Language learning underlying the PPP views language as a series of "products" that can be acquired sequentially as "accumulated entities" (Rutherford, 1987 cited in Ellis, 2003). However, SLA research has shown that learners do not acquire language in that way (Selinker, 1972 cited in Lightbown & Spada, 1999). Learners construct a series of systems, known as interlanguages, which are restructured as learners incorporate new features. Furthermore, research on developmental sequences (Meisel, et al., 1981; Meisel, 1986; Schumann, 1979; Pienemann, et al., 1988) has shown that learners pass through a series of transitional stages in acquiring a specific grammatical feature, even taking months or years to acquire that grammatical feature (Ellis, 2003).

In the production stage in the PPP model, these selected-to-teach grammar items and functions would not meet the authentic communicative learner's needs. In the production stage, if the communication were carried out with an explicit command to use the target structure, the task ceases to be communicative. For this reason, the target language structure will be learned best through the process of struggling to communicate (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983). The proposal on the "post-task" teaching by Ellis (1999) in which the language problems students experienced after they had completed the task will be addressed seems to fit the framework of teaching grammar in the process of communication more effectively than Littlewood's (1981) "pre-teaching" grammar in which structures are taught and then practiced in communicative activities.

CLT assumes that teaching categories of notions and functions aims at developing learners' discourse competence. However, these categories are not all manifestations of discourse competence. Discourse competence requires learners to display their *organizational knowledge* above the level of sentence meaning. This is to say discourse competence would not be developed even with the teaching of notions and functions of the target language as CLT assumes.

An inherent feature of the PPP paradigm is that the communicative interaction is not authentic by definition in itself. The "do-as-if" character of the foreign language classroom should be understood from the beginning (Wolff, 1994). The production stage calls for the tasks that aim to elicit the structure as the target of the lesson. Designing tasks that elicit such structures in the lesson is not easy. Learners could use their compensation strategies to perform the tasks instead of using the supposed structures. This problem can be solved by making clear to learners that they must use the targeted structure when they perform the task, encouraging students to focus on form. Then the task ceases to be "communicative" (Ellis, 2003). Social appropriateness (socio-linguistic competence) of language use can hardly be assessed as achieved in do-as-if communications. Only by experimenting with language in real communication can learners experience why they succeed or fail to put their message across and allow for adjustments in future performances. In other words, due to the inauthentic nature of communication in PPP classrooms, learners do lack oppor-

tunities to develop their *meta-cognitive skills* or *strategic competence* (Bachman, 1996 cited in Ellis, 2003).

In the light of second language acquisition (SLA), the PPP teaching paradigm fails to develop learners' communicative competence. Language development can be stimulated through *negotiation of meaning* (Pica, 1994; Gass & Varonis, 1994; Wolff, 1994) and *the operation of strategic competence* (Bialystok, 1990). Communicative competence requires that learners are engaged in communication (Savignon, 2002), using the language for authentic or real-life purposes (Brown, 2000; Gallo-way, 1993), which is not the case in CLT. Without experiencing language use in real-life communication, learners are deprived of opportunities to develop their socio-linguistic competence and to reflect on their language discourse, on their authentic failures and on success in previous language experiences. Without these experiences, learners cannot improve their future performance and cannot develop strategic competence, a critical quality of a competent language learner/user.

From the recognition that (1) it is ineffective to develop communicative competence by specifying in linguistic terms what a learner should learn and that (2) language learning must occur in authentic communication, researchers into SLA and teachers propose the implementation of task-based language teaching.

2.2 Task-based language learning (TBLL)

2.2.1 Rationale for task-based language learning

Proposals for the implementation of TBLL grows from the recognition that there have been few attempts to implement principles in the field of SLA into the classroom practice (Ellis, 1997) in existing teaching methods. The following sections will discuss how the principles of second language acquisition (*input, interaction, output* and *learners' variables*) work for the success of language learning.

Due to the limited amount of time devoted to language classrooms, the teacher and textbook subsume their roles as the main sources of *input* in the traditional language classrooms. The shortage of "rich input" (i.e., necessary, sufficient, efficient) (Skehan, 1998) supposed to trigger language acquisition hinders language acquisition in language classrooms.

Whether input comes from interlocutors, from written texts or speeches, learners need to be engaged in *interaction* with the language. Language tasks which provide opportunities for learners to access the input they find relevant will create interactions. These interactions could involve negotiations of meaning. These tasks focus on the meaning, or in other words they focus on "playing with the language" (Errey & Schollaert, 2003).

When learners go through the process from input, intake, to *output*, they go through the stages of understanding what does or what does not work and how things work or do not work for their learning (i.e., metacognition). Activities in the standard language classrooms fail to help learners construct metacognition. The activities fail to do so because they do not offer students opportunities to evaluate what they think about the learning process leading to output and if necessary to plan how to improve their learning.

In addition to input, interactions and output, it is a fact that even learners who happen to be placed in the same classroom are not all at the same level of cognitive development, interlanguage development or motivation for learning. Taking learner variables in language learning into account could better meet learners' needs and motivate them to learn. The quality of teaching and learning the target language in the classroom that implements the same teaching content and the same teaching method for all students must be questioned. If learners' variables are supposed to interfere in language learning, then the learning environment embodied in teaching procedures must be compatible with the teaching approach to guarantee the consistency of a teaching method and the quality of learning outcomes. In other words, a teaching method attuning to developments in the field of second language acquisition has to cope *with differences among learners*.

In short, SLA principles indicate that to develop the learners' communicative competence, the learning materials and teaching methods should create an environment in which students get exposed to "rich" input of the target language and engage in interaction with the input (Prabhu, 1987). Interacting with the input helps learners establish a link between new knowledge and existing knowledge. Interacting with the input will also give learners opportunities to focus on meaning as a priority and then see the form of the language (meaning-focused first, form-focused later). In addition to input, a focus must be placed on output. The output affected by learners' and context variables is a base from which learners will learn how to evaluate their own language learning and from which a teacher can assess how much support a student will need in future learning tasks. Task-based language learning is expected to consider these SLA principles, manifesting through its approach, design and procedure.

2.2.2 *Task-based language learning*

Approach. TBLL claims that learners discover the language system when they communicate. This claim is built upon the assumption that language is acquired through communication (Howatt, 1984). Task-based learning focuses on learning *about how language works in discourse as an input to new language production; the language input is language data, spoken and written texts, rather than language models presented as targeted structures*. The whole issue is how to design tasks which help learners to use the language to learn it, in other words, to develop their communicative competence.

Design. Tasks hold a central position in second language acquisition research and in language pedagogy. Second language acquisition researchers and language teachers use "tasks" as instruments to investigate how second language learning takes place and what makes language learning successful respectively. They investigate which types of tasks contribute to the development of which kind of competence in learners. No attempt is made to specify the teaching content in terms of a set of language items. Instead, what is designed is a set of "tasks" for learners to perform (Ellis, 1999), and to learn from this performance. Therefore, it is essential to define what a

task is so that curriculum developers and language educators can design genuine tasks that stimulate language use.

What is a task? Definitions of tasks abound in the literature (Long, 1985; Richards, Platt, & Weber, 1985; Prabhu, 1987; Breen, 1989; Nunan, 1989; Willis, 1996; Lee, 2000; Bygate, Skehan & Swain, 2001). There is no complete agreement in the field of SLA research and language pedagogy on what exactly a task is. Various dimensions of tasks are used to describe what a task is: (1) *The scope of a task*, (2) *the perspective from which a task is viewed*, (3) *the authenticity of the task*, (4) *the linguistic skills required to perform the task*, (5) *the psychological processes involved in task performance* and (6) *the outcome of the task* (Ellis, 2003).

The scope of a task refers to which *kind of knowledge* is required for learners to perform the task, or which kind of knowledge should be developing in learners in performing the task. The scope of a task refers to the *continuum of form-focused or meaning-focused*.

The knowledge required could be *non-linguistic* or *linguistic*. In his definition of task, Long (1985) views a task as a piece of work undertaken for oneself or the others, freely or with some reward such as painting a fence, dressing a child, making an airline reservation or borrowing a book from the library. From Long's (ibid.) definition, a task can require language to perform (i.e., making an airline reservation) or require no linguistic knowledge (i.e., painting a fence). Nunan (1989) limits the scope of a task to the requirement of *language use* to do the task. He defines a 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. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right (Nunan, 1989).

Focus on form or focus on meaning is used as criteria to distinguish a *language activity* from *task*. While Breen's (1989) definition incorporates all kinds of language activity, including exercises as tasks, Nunan (1989) and Skehan (1996) restrict the term "tasks" to activities where meaning is primary. The distinction between a task and an exercise is clarified by Ellis (2003). In his view, both tasks and exercises are language activities. *Tasks* are activities that primarily call for meaning-focused language use; *exercises* are activities that primarily call for form-focused language use. Widdowson (1998) further narrows the definition of task. Both tasks and exercises need to require learners to pay attention to both meaning and form. What distinguishes a task from an exercise is the kind of meaning involved. Whereas a task is concerned with pragmatic meaning (the use of language in context), an exercise is concerned with semantic meaning (the systematic meanings that specific forms can convey irrespective of context). However, Widdowson's (ibid.) argument is mainly based on the distinction between the terms "form-focused" and "meaning-focused", so the distinction is based on terminology alone (Ellis, 2003). Implicit in the distinction between task as a meaning-focused activity and exercise as a form-focused activity, is the *role of learners* when performing these language activities. In doing tasks, learners work *primarily* as language users and in doing exercises, learners work *primarily* as language learners, which means that learners

do not always focus on meaning and act primarily as language users when performing a task.

The *perspective* from which the task is viewed refers to whether a task is seen from the task designers' or the task executors' point of view. Perhaps a task is designed to encourage the focus on meaning but carrying it out, learners focus on form more than language use (displaying their knowledge of language). Prabhu (1987), Breen (1989), Nunan (1989), Lee (2000) and Ellis (2003) adopt the task-designer's perspective to view tasks. They see them as "work plans" that intend to engage learners in meaning-focused communication. In some definitions (i.e., Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Lee, 2000) rubrics in the plan of doing the task (e.g., the outcome of the task and the sequences of task execution to achieve the outcome) are specified.

The *authenticity of the task* refers to whether the activities correspond to real-life or at least manifest some relationship to real-world activities (Skehan, 1996) so that upon completion of the task, learners can transfer the language they have learned and/or used while executing the tasks to perform real-world tasks. Activities that are situationally authentic and/or seek to achieve interactional authenticity are classified as tasks (Ellis, 2003). One learns a foreign language to meet their authentic communicative purposes. For this reason, tasks through which the target language is learned/used, aiming to transfer its use to real-life, should be labeled as sub-tasks, while activities corresponding to real-life are labeled as tasks.

Language skills involved in performing the activities are not always explicitly stated in definitions of tasks. Long's (1985) activities require oral and written language. Richards and Platt and Weber (1985) explicitly state that a task "may or may not involve the production of language". Other authors on task-based teaching such as Crookes and Gass (1993) and Bygate, Skehan and Swain (2001) assume that tasks are directed at oral, mainly speaking skills. Ellis (2003) explicitly states that activities involving any of the four language skills are tasks. If the purpose of a language activity is to help learners to learn (via using) the language, this activity must create opportunities for them to use the four language skills so that they can learn how to communicate. Then the activity can be classified as a task.

A cognitive dimension is embodied in executing language activities. In Nunan's (1989) definition, tasks involving learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language only address the linguistic dimension of tasks. In Prabhu's (1987) definition, tasks should ideally involve learners in reasoning-making connections between pieces of information, deducing information and evaluating information. Knowledge of the cognitive processing required in doing tasks will help to design proper tasks that enhance second language acquisition. Robinson (2001) proposes the variety of tasks in terms of their complexity of the cognitive demands that tasks require on the part of the learners. All authors deal with the outcomes of a task. Ellis (2003) distinguishes the outcome of the task from the aim of the task. *The outcome* concerns what learners arrive at upon completing the task (i.e., a story) and *the aim* "refers to the pedagogic purpose of the task, which is to elicit meaning-focused language use, receptive and/or productive" (Ellis, 2003: 8). If the pedagogical purpose of the task were to elicit meaning-focused language use, both receptively and/or productively, we would say it is not enough for an activity to be classified as the aim of the task. The pedagogical purpose of the task is to

elicit meaning-focused language use, both receptively and productively, and to elicit *textual features* of language input that learners have come across or have been presented to.

Working definition. Various definitions of tasks focus on one or more of the six mentioned dimensions. One component of communicative competence, meta-cognitive skills (strategic competence), has not yet been included. Therefore, tasks that are used to develop communicative competence should create opportunities for learners to get exposed to "rich" language input (*authenticity*) so that learners can employ their cognitive skills (*cognitive dimension*) to interact and evaluate the input and opportunities for learners to use (negotiation of meaning) the four language skills integratively (*scope, language skills*), to plan how to do the task, monitor task execution (*meta-cognitive skills*), and to arrive at a real-life *outcome*, from which learners can evaluate task execution to adjust later task executions.

Based on what has been examined, an activity that creates opportunities for learners (motivates learners) to use the target language authentically (i.e., negotiating meaning, exchanging information on planning work, problem solving, evaluating language input and the effects of their performance) to execute real-life work (for oneself or for the other) is a task (Trinh & Rijlaarsdam, 2003). The target language is used for knowledge constructing and for knowledge activating. Knowledge includes *knowledge of the language and knowledge of other fields*. In other words, a genuine language task must create an opportunity (i.e., a social context) in which learners can practice real life language use, with interaction mainly with peers working together to fulfill that task and with self-evaluate task execution and to reflect on their language learning.

The previous section has reviewed the scopes used in definitions of tasks found in the literature from 1985-2003. At the end of the previous section, I proposed a working definition of a task. The following section reviews research findings in the field of SLA, which have proposed principles concerning designing tasks for effective language learning.

Designing tasks. Two theoretical accounts that contribute insights to designing tasks are the *psycholinguistic approach* and the *socio-cultural approach* (Ellis, 2000). The psycholinguistic approach perceives language acquisition as the product of processing input and output and provides important information for *planning* task-based teaching and learning. Researchers from this approach (Long, 1983; Skehan, 1996; 1998) establish the task features that have significant impact on the way learners process language in performance and, therefore, potentially, on how they acquire the second language. The socio-cultural approach views language learning as socially constructed through interaction of one kind or another. This approach also illuminates the kinds of *improvisation* that teachers and learners need to engage in during task-based activity to promote communicative efficiency and SLA. Therefore, tasks should be executed in accordance with the personal dispositions and goals of individual learners in specific settings.

The psycholinguistic approach. From a psycholinguistic perspective, a task is a vehicle that guides learners to engage in certain types of information processing that are important for effective language use and/or language acquisition. This necessarily means that there are task features which are beneficial to language acquisition. Within this perspective, different theoretical positions are held. The two most prominent are the Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1983) and the cognitive approach (Skehan, 1996; 1998).

The Interaction Hypothesis proposes that not all tasks are equally effective in promoting second language development. Tasks which generate more *negotiations of meaning* (e.g., requesting clarifications, comprehension checks, confirmation check, and recasts) would help learners more effectively in the process of language learning. The Interaction Hypothesis suggests that (1) the more modifications in interactions lead to comprehensible input through decomposing or segmenting input, the more acquisition is facilitated, that (2) when learners receive feedback, acquisition is facilitated, and that (3) when learners are pushed to reformulate their own utterances, acquisition is promoted. Related to the Interaction Hypothesis is Swain's (1985, 1995) approach on the role that output can play in SLA. Swain (ibid.) suggests that output serves learners to notice their linguistic gaps in their linguistic knowledge and thus triggers both analysis of input and their own existing internal resources. This involves what might be called the *negotiation of form*, an attempt to determine collaboratively which form to use in order to express meaning accurately and coherently. However, the results of Swain's research to date are not encouraging. Swain and Lapkin (2000) found no effect of major task differences in the degree of attention that second language learners paid to form.

Researchers (e.g., Skehan, 1996; 1998) from the *cognitive approach* have examined *learner production*. When exploring the effectiveness of tasks to language development, these researchers are concerned with the cognitive demands tasks place on language learners. They are also concerned with the effects of these demands on learner performances, namely *accuracy*, *fluency* and *complexity* (i.e., structures and vocabulary used). Research findings (Foster & Skehan, 1996; 1999; Skehan & Foster, 1997; 2001) reveal that 1) if the *topic* is very familiar, students will tend to be fluent with greater accuracy, 2) *interactive tasks* produce more accuracy and complexity while monologic tasks lead to more fluency, 3) if the task involves some *negotiation of outcomes* and give a justification for it, this leads to greater complexity of language use, and 4) tasks with *overall structure* (i.e., planning) for students to follow have a clear influence on the learners' fluency and some influence on accuracy. A good task should take into account all these findings to develop learner's fluency, complexity and accuracy.

Willis (1996) and Skehan (1998) propose principles for task design. Willis (ibid.) suggests the provision of *input, language use and language focus at some points in a task cycle*. Skehan's (ibid.) task design starts from the section of *a range of targeted structures* (not a single target structure as proposed in the notional and functional syllabus of the CLT). The use of targeted structures will be supported by *the choice of task and conditions* in which the task is implemented. A priority in task-based approaches is to mobilize *learners' meta-cognitive resources*, to keep track of what is being learned and what remains to be learned. Principles for task design proposed

by Willis (1996) are in line with the aim to develop communicative competence, but are not sufficient to enhance the development strategic competence. Developing learners' metacognitive skills is part of Skehan's (1998) model. However, Skehan's (1998) first principle concerned with the selection of a range of targeted structures on which tasks will be developed can be inferred from his view of language learning as *learning the linguistic system* and *language learning as an ordered and orderly process* (Tong, 1999).

The psycholinguistic approach serves to identify features of task design and task implementation with the potential to impact on L2 performance and on SLA. However, three apparent weaknesses of the cognitive approach to task-based learning can be observed. *First*, the direct relationship between task design and second language acquisition is not observed because research in the field is cross-sectional. The direct relationship between the features of tasks, task implementation and second language acquisition must be examined longitudinally so that research findings in this domain would be more valid than they have been. *Second*, learner factors such as motivation or linguistic and cultural background are not taken into consideration. *Third*, the approach does not take into account the setting (authenticity) where the task is performed. A task in a do-as-if setting is certainly performed in a different way than in an authentic situation, which can bring about different outcomes on learners' language achievement and the learners' self-regulated learning.

The socio-cultural approach. One of the central claims of the researchers from the socio-cultural approach (e.g., Swain & Lapkin, 1998) to TBLL is that learners co-construct the activity they engage in according to their socio-historical background and locally determined goals (Ellis, 2000). To perform a task, learners have to interpret it and put effort into orienting the task and establishing the goals to perform it. Littlewood (1992) strongly supports the position put forward by the socio-cultural approach. To him, tasks should concern the level of learner's active involvement in performing the task. To achieve learners' active involvement in doing the task, learner autonomy should be developed (Little, 1991) and interactive learning via interactions of learners with their social environment should be carried out. Learners would be actively involved in learning as long as the *space for personal contribution is provided*. To accommodate personal contribution, language learners might choose the learning content and learning methods to achieve their learning goals. To gain learners' active involvement, the *affective and social conditions* in which language development takes place must be created. These conditions support the claim that learning arises in *interactions* with others. Learners succeed in performing a task with the assistance of another and they then internalize this task so that they can perform it unassisted. Interactions mediate learning. To perform new tasks, learners are scaffolded by participants. It is clear why interactions, from the socio-cultural perspective, must play a role in succeeding in learning a language.

While researchers in the psycholinguistic approach emphasize the role of task features in task performance and in second language acquisition, the researchers in the socio-cultural approach are interested in how learners perform the task and how success in task performance contributes to the acquisition of the target language. The focus on the process and product of task performance of the socio-cultural ap-

proach indicates the emphasis on the role of reflection on task execution in second language acquisition (e.g., how learning arises out of task performance). This is the strong point of the socio-cultural perspective. Tasks in task-based learning, therefore, should include *reflective activities* that stimulate task executors to look back at how they have planned, monitored and performed the task.

However, the socio-cultural approach exposes shortcomings. Studies in this approach lack longitudinal evidence. Task features have not been given a big role in socio-cultural approach. Research findings from a psychological approach have proved that certain task features enhance task performance contributing to second language acquisition.

To summarize, whereas researchers from the psycholinguistic approach contribute to the planning of language teaching, in other words, assisting the design of tasks, researchers from the socio-cultural approach contribute to the understanding that an activity arising from a task might not be as was planned, due to participants adapting to the task. This also illuminates how teachers can improvise activities that help learners to achieve language skills. From a pedagogical perspective, the two approaches are inseparable. They mutually inform task-based language learning. Therefore, a language program based on the task-based approach should address the *planning and improvising* dimension of teaching and learning. The combination of the two approaches suggest principles in designing tasks which include the *provision of input, choice, interaction* (affective and social conditions), *task structure, output* (negotiated task outcome, language use), *reflection on input and output*. A resulting question is what constitutes a sound framework comprising task-types, topics and task sequencing (Ellis, 2003) for designing a task-based language-learning syllabus.

Task-type. Willis (1996) proposes six types of tasks: *Listing* (e.g., brainstorming, fact-finding), *ordering and sorting* (e.g., sequencing items, classifying items) *comparing* (e.g., finding similarities) *problem solving* (e.g., requiring executors' intellectual and reasoning power), *sharing personal experiences* (e.g., talking about oneself, sharing one's experiences with others), and *creative tasks* (e.g., projects involving pairs or groups of learners in free creative work). Of the six types of tasks, *creative tasks* show as allowing more interactions than any other task type and more personal involvement by providing more choices for learners in performing the task.

Topics. Decisions on what students will be asked to communicate about should be considered. Thus, a key element in the design of the tasks must be the choice of *thematic content* (Ellis, 2003). The theme generator by Estaire and Zanón (1994) specifies themes that are found to be most relevant to learners: (1) *Students*, (2) *Homes*, (3) *School life*, and (4) *The world around us*.

Task sequencing. Tasks must match learners' level of development. Important criteria for sequencing the tasks are (1) allowing learners to make informed choices when they do the tasks and (2) the thematic content of relevant tasks because learners will be the ones who know what fits them best.

To summarize, the development of communicative competence is strengthened with the support of tasks that create opportunities for learners to work together to fulfill

free creative work (*project work*), to interact and evaluate the input, to actively get involved in performing the tasks and to reflect on the input and output. The themes must be relevant to learners. How such a task-based syllabus is realized in the classroom will be discussed in the next section, *procedure*.

Procedure. In this section of procedure, I will review the three procedures for task-based language learning lessons put forward by Willis (1996), Skehan (1998) and Errey & Schollaert (2003).

Willis' (1996) procedure. Willis (1996) proposes three stages in task-based teaching: *Pre-task*, *task-cycle* and *language-focus*. In the *pre-task stage*, the teacher introduces the topic and the task. Then the teacher explores the topic with the class, highlights useful words and phrases, and helps students understand task instructions and prepare adequately. Students may hear a recording of others doing a similar task. In the *task cycle*, students do the tasks in pairs or small groups. The teacher monitors at a distance. Students prepare the report for the whole class (orally or in writing) including how they did the task, their decisions or discoveries. Then groups present their reports to the class or exchange written reports and compare results. In the *language focus stage*, students examine and discuss features of the text and then the teacher supervises the practice of new words, phrases and patterns occurring in the data (input).

This procedure shows two strengths. First, in the pre-task stage, the introduction and exploration of the task topic, task instructions, useful words and phrases for task execution and even exposure to *input* are all set out. Second, in the task-cycle, students work together to do the task, creating *negotiations* when using the language and doing the tasks, and they use the language authentically to talk about the *output*, which involves providing opportunities to develop fluency, accuracy and complexity. So *active involvement* of students is satisfying.

However, Willis' (ibid.) procedure shows two shortcomings, namely the language focus stage. *First*, there is the lack of opportunity for learners to evaluate the linguistic input so that they do not discover whether their exposure to or interaction with the input is effective in their task execution and on their target language use. *Second*, language structures are instruments to help language learners fulfill their communicative needs (production) rather than to fulfill learners' perception (i.e., understanding or even mastering language structures). As a result, language focus should be on what learners have failed to use when they executed the task and should follow reflection on language use during task execution and after reporting the results of doing the task.

Skehan's (1998) procedure. Skehan (1998) proposes three stages: (1) The pre-task stage, (2) the during-task phase, and (3) post-task activities.

The pre-task phase focuses on the language. It aims at introducing new language, mobilizing it, recycling it, easing the processing load and pushing learners to interpret tasks in a more demanding way. In the pre-task stage, activities including teaching, consciousness raising and planning are conducted. Teaching aims at introducing and perhaps restructuring the new language. It could be deductive and explicit or inductive and implicit to introduce new language to learners' interlanguage system

or to achieve restructuring of the underlying language system respectively. Consciousness-raising activities can reduce cognitive complexity (e.g., learners could observe similar tasks being completed by someone else or could be given related pre-tasks to do, or learners could take roles in similar tasks). Planning time aims to achieve fluency, accuracy and complexity. If task executors have time for planning their task execution, fluency, accuracy and complexity for the task outcomes concerning language production will be enhanced.

In the during-task phase, the manner (i.e., manipulations: Time pressure, modality, support, control) in which a task is done affect learners' attention when performing the task and refers to pedagogic decisions affecting learners' focus of attention through *extended task procedures*.

The post-task phase includes activities aiming to alter *attentional balance, reflection* and *consolidation*. *Attentional balance* refers to the degree to which form is focused on, so that the principal effect will be on accuracy. *Reflection* and *consolidation* are to encourage learners to restructure and to use the task and task performance as input to identify shortcomings and to develop language to handle these shortcomings in the underlying interlanguage system.

Prominent in Skehan's (1998) procedure are the methods of organizing communicatively oriented instructions that balance the concerns for form and meaning. To achieve this balance, task difficulty, the selective effects of tasks, the effects of the conditions in which the task has been implemented, and the chances of achieving a productive balance between form and meaning are cited for example.

Skehan's (ibid.) suggestion on starting the pre-task stage by *teaching* the new language needs to be questioned. Does what is taught in this stage suits learners' communicative needs? In this light, Skehan's (1998) fundamental assumption is *learning to use the language*. As indicated earlier, what is included in a "learning to use the language" paradigm does not ensure what learners need in their authentic communication. A strong point in Skehan's (ibid.) procedure is the reflection and consolidation in the post-task activities that create opportunities for learners to identify shortcomings and develop the interlanguage system to handle these shortcomings. However, what lacks in Skehan's (ibid.) reflection and consolidation activities is that the focus is on *the aim to learn the target language only, not on the learning experiences with the target language*. In other words, reflection activities just focus on learning a language as a product, not as a process.

Errey & Schollaert's (2003) (the TABASCO) procedure. The most comprehensive procedure for task-based language learning is from Errey & Schollaert (2003). Their task cycle consists of seven stages.

1) Pre-task concept focus. In this stage, teachers' attention is drawn to how would-be-executed tasks could fit in most effectively with wider pedagogic aims and sequences in the *curriculum*. The focus is also on *task challenge*, potential for gaining learners' involvement and developing learners' motivation. The flexibility of the task is also considered at this stage.

2) Deciding on the task. This stage requires teacher and learners to decide on tasks relevant to learners together, which is seen as motivating learners to get involved in carrying out the tasks. In other words, it is the content or the *what* of the task.

3) Negotiating the task process. This stage relates to the procedure that will be used to execute the task. In other words, this is the *how* of the task. Collaborative decisions from learners and the teacher are unpredictable and dependent on the interactions between them. As long as learners get involved in doing the tasks, they will negotiate – with or without teacher’s assistance – the decisions regarding learning goals/learning outcomes. These decisions are the basis for later self-evaluation. Negotiations and decisions need to be explicitly clarified to learners so that they can understand the link between performing the task and the development of their communicative competence.

4) Doing the task/Working out the process. This stage is concerned with the role of the teacher, when the task is in execution and the breakdown of tasks into sub-tasks aimed at strengthening the participation of each individual learner. Research has indicated which task features (task topics, interactive tasks, monologic tasks, negotiation of outcomes, tasks with overall structure) influence the level of task difficulty and which task features push learners to higher performances in *accuracy, fluency and complexity* (see the section *Designing tasks in task-based teaching* in this book). Based on these research findings, teachers can influence the task choice of learners as well as the task size so that they can stimulate a more effective progress.

5) Sharing, bringing back, reporting to the bigger class. At this stage, learners have a sense of achievement and ownership, upon finishing the task phase, because they can bring the results of their work back to their peers. They can learn from peer feedback on their work and from others’ contributions. The *sharing* stage is a good time to enable the teacher and students to use the less pressured environment of the classroom to focus on the language as a system that can strengthen language use. The *sharing* stage is also a good time for learners to return to, consolidate and extend what they have encountered.

6) Feedback and reflection process. At this stage, teachers give feedback and learners focus on goal setting and the results of task execution. It is at this stage that learners can go from particular to general. Learners can be drawn away from the attention they paid to language elements in the task, to reflect on, systemize and integrate language in such a way that it is recalled more effectively in future learning. The overriding aim is to engineer a focus on form, but the particular emphasis is to bring out the idea of language as a system.

7) Redrafting, carrying through and peer evaluation cycle. Learners consolidate what they have done right in the previous stage to make sure that the results of the task execution actually become part of their interlanguage capacity *and become used* as opposed to simply being known. This stage consolidates not simply language learning but also knowledge about language learning (i.e., metacognitive knowledge), because learners are able to reflect as learners and decision-makers on their own learning. This is most relevant for future learning. It is in this final stage that learn-

ers need to be most self-aware and to recognize their accomplishments, but able to evaluate what has worked and what will need to be done in the future. Learners do not simply learn what teachers teach. They have to gain insights into themselves as learners and into what they have to improve. This is the only way in which they can take effective responsibility for their future learning.

The stages proposed in the TABASCO task procedure shows to be more comprehensive than Willis' (1996) and Skehan's (1998) procedure in two areas. *First*, learners are provided with choices of or with negotiations on what task to do and how to do that task, so opportunities for authentic interactions among learners themselves and that with the teacher and for the development of learner autonomy are guaranteed (e.g., as in stages 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5). *Second*, learners have opportunities to reflect on their task of learning the language and the learning process (e.g., as in stages 6 and 7). The TABASCO procedure shows to be feasible; however, it is not specific in stating on which kinds of research each stage in the procedure is based on.

The seven stages of the TABASCO task procedure manifests the three main stages of *planning*, *monitoring* and *evaluating*. In the planning stage, learners in groups plan what kind of tasks they like to do (the size, the purpose), depending on their communicative needs and how to do that (with what kind of support, with what kind of resources as sub-tasks). In the monitoring stage, groups of learners will execute the task they have chosen for their group in the manner they have decided (with support from the teacher if learners think they need it) and they will report their task execution to other groups in front of the class. In the evaluation phase, students will self-evaluate their task execution and language-learning task. This phase also includes peer evaluation. Learners will reflect on their self-evaluation and peer evaluation to adjust themselves to future task executions and language learning, when genuine learning occurs.

3. CONCLUSION

Task-based language learning, with its syllabus organized around tasks that provide *input*, *interactions*, *task structure*, *output*, and *reflection on input and output*, having the principles firmly grounded in the field of SLA and research into the effectiveness of tasks, is theoretically sounder than Communicative Language Teaching in terms of developing learners' communicative competence.

The strength of the task-based approach to language learning is that language is freed to assume its natural role of the medium rather than the message. When working on a negotiated project, each student will approach the learning task in his or her own way (i.e., exercising choices of learning content and learning strategies), which means to take control of their own learning, but in cooperation with others. The teacher is there to guide, to offer alternatives, to suggest and to discuss with students. In such a situation, students are involved affectively, socially, cognitively and meta-cognitively in a way that is difficult to replicate in standard classroom settings. The task-based approach offers opportunities for learners to take control over their learning management, learning content and cognitive processes, or in other words, to

develop their learner autonomy. This is to say, task-based language learning fits the aim of developing learner autonomy and communicative competence.

The type of tasks that allows learners to choose the "what" and "how" of the task is the *creative work* in the form of project work proposed by Willis (1996). Project work also creates authentic interactions in planning how to do the task, in performing the task, in evaluating task performances, and in setting up future task executions between learners when working in groups and between learners and teacher when learners are supported by the teacher.

The theme of the task should be relevant to learners to enhance learners' involvement in doing the tasks and to reduce the task difficulty. Estaire and Zanón (1994) specified themes that are found to be most relevant to learners (1) *Students*, (2) *Homes*, (3) *School Life*, and (4) *The World around Us*.

Sound procedures for task-based lessons must include all the principles that aim to develop learners' communicative competence. The task procedure proposed by Errey & Schollaert (2003) is comprehensive in making the goal of communicative competence achievable. The procedure of task-based language lessons can be summarized as consisting of three phases: *Planning*, *executing* and *evaluating* the task of language learning and the experience of task execution.

Section 3 concluded that the task-based language learning fits the aims of developing learner autonomy and communicative competence. The following section will summarize the parameters implemented in designing a curriculum aiming at developing learner autonomy and communicative competence.

4. TWO PARAMETERS FOR A CURRICULUM AIMING AT DEVELOPING LEARNER AUTONOMY AND COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

One learns to use a target language by using it (Little, 2000b; Le, 2004; personal communication). Communicative competence in a second or foreign language is developed through using the target language to communicate (Coyle, 2000). Communicative competence is part of what learners are aiming at. In response to this aim, curriculum developers and classroom practitioners should, even must, ensure that learners have every opportunity *to use the target language to learn it*. Therefore, it is essential that the target language is the usual medium of classroom communication.

The goal of all learning is that the learner should acquire knowledge and/or skills that she can deploy independently of the immediate context of learning. In other words, the true measure of success in learning is the extent to which the learner achieves autonomy. Experiences with *using the language to learn it* help language users and learners coping with unfamiliar interactional situations and new discourse types that language users face in daily communication. Therefore, the paradigm of using the target language to learn it could fit the aim of developing learner autonomy.

A language curriculum and its corresponding teaching approach aiming at developing learner autonomy and communicative competence should be developed around tasks. Such tasks should create opportunities for learners to use the target

language to learn it and to learn how to learn the language. An ideal type of tasks that would offer the mentioned opportunities is the project work.

From the psycholinguistic perspective to task design (as discussed in section 2.2.2, chapter 3), two curriculum development specifications emerge: *Interactions* and *task features*. In a curriculum aiming at developing communicative competence a task must create opportunities for authentic interactions among task executors. Task features (e.g., topics, negotiation of the outcomes, overall planning) must enhance task executors' language fluency, complexity, and accuracy.

From the socio-cultural approach to task design (as discussed in section 2.2.2, chapter 3) and the curriculum-based and teacher-based approaches (as discussed in section 2.2, chapter 4), a third curriculum specification is *choice*. The pedagogy of *choice* would motivate students to get involved in their learning, which necessarily implies that the control of learning is passed to students from the teachers. The learner-based approaches to developing learner autonomy (as discussed in section 2.2, chapter 4) propose the fourth specification, "learner development". *Learner development* aims to promote learners' behavioral and psychological developments (i.e., affective, social, cognitive and meta-cognitive skills) to help them take control over their learning. That leaves us with four design specifications of a language curriculum for communicative competence and learner autonomy: *Learner choice*, *interactions*, *task features* and *learner development*.

To achieve the aims of developing learner autonomy and communicative competence, the curriculum should be constructed around tasks, namely language projects. When designing the language projects in the intended curriculum, I considered task features such as topics, interactiveness, the negotiation of the task outcomes and the opportunities for making the overall planning of the task. Learner development is also included in the language projects in which students can negotiate the outcomes of the tasks (i.e., using and developing social, affective strategies), making overall planning of the tasks (i.e., using and developing cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies). Therefore, the two parameters "task features" and "learner development" are operationalized in the tasks themselves. *Choice*, a prerequisite to learner autonomy, manifests learning content (i.e., the themes or topic of the task, the outcomes) and the learning methodology (i.e., overall planning, learner development). Therefore, choice is the umbrella parameter of task features and learner development. Choice is the prerequisite to the development of learner autonomy. The psychological approach maintains that interactions in the target language create opportunities for language learners to make negotiations of meaning which will bring about language acquisition. Therefore, *interaction* is hypothesized to facilitate second language acquisition. In sum, the two parameters *choice* and *interaction* are assumed the leading parameters in the curriculum aiming for learner autonomy and communicative competence. In the next chapter, we will describe the two parameters choice and interactions in more detail and describe how these two parameters have been operationalized in designing the intended curriculum which is implemented in experiment 1.