



Teachers, pupils and tasks: The genesis of dynamic learning opportunities



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ABSTRACT

This study presents a qualitative analysis of two students' learning opportunities drawn from a larger, quasi-experimental intervention reported in Van Gorp, De Maeyer and Van den Branden (2009a, 2009b). It focuses on the learning of content and language by two pupils in two primary school classrooms, and on the role of the teacher in enhancing the students' learning. Participating in a larger task-based science project the two second language learners of Dutch (age 11–12) worked on a lesson unit consisting mainly of co-operative reading and discussion tasks. Students' development in content knowledge and second language development were evaluated by an integrated language and content test in a pretest–posttest design. Two successful students were selected for in-depth analysis. It was hypothesized that the interaction between the teacher and those pupils could (partially) explain the students' progress. Therefore, the relationship between the teacher–pupil interaction and learning gains was explored by means of microgenetic discourse analysis.

The results of the discourse analysis illustrate how these two successful pupils constructed their own learning path in the classroom, making use of the teacher–pupil interaction to varying degrees, and how the interaction between task, pupil(s) and teacher facilitated and constrained learning opportunities.

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1. Introduction

In the Flemish educational system a high proportion of students who speak a mother tongue other than the main medium of instruction (i.e., Dutch) underachieve (OECD, 2012). Therefore, Flemish teachers attempt to maximally support these students in developing Dutch language proficiency up to academic levels (Van den Branden, 2006).

During the past two decades task-based language teaching (TBLT) has gained momentum as a potentially effective approach to teaching academic language to second language learners (Van den Branden, Bygate, & Norris, 2009). In TBLT students acquire a second language (L2) by performing authentic meaning-oriented language tasks that have a clear and motivating goal.

TBLT has clear links with content-based instruction (CBI). CBI aims to help learners to construct knowledge about cognitively demanding, curricular topics and to develop the academic register needed to understand and talk about these topics (Lyster & Ballinger, 2011; Met, 1991). Both CBI and TBLT aim at constructing powerful integrated learning environments

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that give rise to meaningful communication and promote task-essential negotiation of meaning and form. In this article we report on an in-depth qualitative study investigating the impact of student–teacher interaction in a task-based CBI intervention aimed to promote L2 students' acquisition of academic content and language.

2. Literature review

As students move through the education system, subject content becomes more abstract and complex, and more detached from real-life experience. (Resnick, 1987). This is accompanied by an increasing complexity in the language of schooling: "Developing the kind of knowledge that comes through schooling requires that students learn to use the language in new ways." (Schleppegrell, 2004, p. 1). The abstract language of the school poses a huge challenge to many L2 learners, and may hinder them in understanding and constructing the necessary content knowledge (Bogaert, Van Gorp, Bultynck, Lanssens, & Depauw, 2006; Gibbons, 2006).

The answer to this challenge might lie in the use of motivating and thought-provoking tasks that allow L2 learners to construct cognitively demanding knowledge through (inter)action with a guiding teacher and peers (Hattie & Yates, 2014; Van Gorp & Bogaert, 2006). The impact of talk and interaction on knowledge construction has been studied extensively (see Cazden, 2001 for an overview). From a functional perspective, participants have been shown to use language to construct content meaning (Mohan & Slater, 2005; Moore & Schleppegrell, 2014; Schleppegrell, 2004), while developing the academic register at the same time (Gibbons, 2006). From an educational perspective, the kinds of classroom talk that contribute to the joint construction of knowledge has been explored. Different types of talk, e.g., 'Accountable Talk' (Michaels, O'Connor, Hall, & Resnick, 2002), 'Exploratory Talk' (Mercer, 1995; Mercer & Littleton, 2007), 'Dialogic Inquiry' (Wells, 1999), 'Collaborative Dialogue' (Swain, 2000), have been shown to be effective in supporting knowledge construction. Underlying these approaches is the "use of discourse-intensive pedagogical practices combining rigorous tasks with carefully orchestrated, teacher-led discussion" (Sohmers, Michaels, O'Connor & Resnick, 2009, p. 106). Kong (2009) points out that discourse-intensive practices have to allow for an in-depth and multi-perspective exploration of new content in order to establish complex knowledge relations in corresponding complex language. In the process, learners need to be able to link new knowledge and concepts to their prior knowledge in meaningful ways (Hattie & Yates, 2014; Mercer & Littleton, 2007).

However, from the 1970s onwards, classroom interaction studies have demonstrated the omnipresence of the Initiation-Response-Evaluation- or Initiation-Response-Feedback-pattern in classroom talk (Mehan, 1979; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). This 'default' pattern is often embedded in teacher-dominated classroom interaction, in which students are passive participants whose main role is to answer the display questions posed by the teachers correctly, and that focusses on the transmission of knowledge by the teacher rather than teacher and student co-constructing knowledge (Gage, 2009).

In Flemish classrooms, too, the transmission mode has been shown to be dominant (Geudens & Rymenans, 1992; Mets & Van den Hauwe, 2003; Temmerman, 2009). As a result, Flemish primary school pupils seem to get minimal opportunities to engage in meaningful conversations and produce extended academic language while doing so (Mets & Van den Hauwe, 2003), which may hinder L2 learners in particular in acquiring the academic register of Dutch.

However, Mortimer and Scott (2003) have challenged the idea that Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) sequences in classroom interaction should be associated with student passivity and reduced learning opportunities. If the feedback move in the IRF sequence is used by the teacher to expand on the student's utterance in an extended way or refer back to prior knowledge or previous student utterances, this may aid student content and language learning. In other words, the jury is still out on the question which particular interaction patterns contribute most to learning, and whether the IRF patterns that mainstream teachers (including Flemish teachers) routinely engage in make a smaller contribution to learning than providing pupils with more extensive opportunities to produce extended turns while exploring complex content as part of performing motivating tasks.

From a methodological point of view, this raises the challenge of relating the objective, external reality of classroom dialogue to the inner, subjective process of learning. Pinpointing a student's individual development and linking it to the classroom interaction as the actual ground where the learning took place is a risky methodological enterprise (Gibbons, 2006). However, researchers should take on this challenge to further our insights into the ways classroom communication facilitates or impedes students' knowledge construction and development of the academic register.

3. The study

3.1. Context, research question and design of the study

The qualitative case study reported in this paper is part of a larger, quasi-experimental study that adopted a pretest–posttest design with a control group. The overall purpose of this larger study was to establish whether L2 learners of Dutch at the end of primary school were able to construct both the knowledge and the academic register necessary to understand new abstract and complex content in task-based CBI. The results of this quantitative study was reported in Van Gorp, De Maeyer and Van den Branden (2009a, 2009b). The purpose of the qualitative study reported here was to explore the specific impact of teacher–student interaction in the students' development of knowledge and academic register.

In the larger, quasi-experimental study an intervention was set up in intact grade six classrooms in five ethno-linguistically diverse primary schools (N = 100). Students were eleven to twelve years old. The intervention consisted of a task-based lesson

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