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# From Improvisation to Fluency: The Basis of Task-based Methodology

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## Some findings of SLA research

Second language acquisition research is still a relatively new area of study, with a 'history' of some thirty years. In that short time I think it would be fair to say that SLA has not found any convincing answers to the question of how we learn languages - but it has shed considerable light on the question of how we do **not** learn languages. It is clear that:

1. *There is no direct and predictable relationship between teaching and learning.*

Elements like do-questions and the terminal 's' with the third person present simple are notoriously resistant to teaching. This is familiar to all of us from our own teaching experience. But the phenomenon was not, perhaps, so obvious before it was identified by researchers like Corder (1971) and Selinker (1972) in the early seventies. We are also aware that:

2. *Some aspects of language seem to be known and not known at the same time.*

Learners can produce, let us say, relative clauses like:

That's the man who robbed me.

If they have time to think things through, perhaps when they are working on a grammar test. But when they produce language spontaneously they show a marked preference for:

\*That's the man who **he** robbed me.

They have control of the correct form when they are thinking consciously about language form, but they fail to apply this knowledge in spontaneous use. Krashen (1982) put this down to the fact that learners operate not one, but two language systems - the *learned* system, which represents the language they have worked at consciously, and the *acquired* system, representing the language that they have picked up in the course of exposure and use.

This may be a useful insight, but it is not an explanation—rather a restatement of the problem. It does, however, highlight another interesting and important phenomenon:

### 3. Learners pick up language they have not been taught.

It is fortunate that a lot of lexis and grammar are simply assimilated. If it were not so it would be almost impossible to achieve even a modest competence in a second language. There are two reasons for this. First, there is so much to learn. Even a modest lexicon will run to thousands of words. Grammatical systems are complex and multifarious. Classroom procedures can offer no more than hints for learners to build on. Second, there is a great deal about language that is simply too subtle to be taught and learned consciously. For example Hughes and McCarthy (1998) show how the generally accepted pedagogic rule ‘that the past perfect tense is used for an event that happened in a past time before another past time ...’ enables learners to make well-formed sentences such as *‘I spoke to Lisa Knox yesterday for the first time. I had met her 10 years ago but had not spoken to her.’* But as Hughes and McCarthy go on to point out this rule does not show ‘that the two sentences would be equally well formed if the second were in the past simple’, although the emphasis would be different. What Hughes and McCarthy do not show is that a careful application of the rule would lead learners to produce some forms like *I opened the door when the postman had knocked*, which are distinctly odd, if not ungrammatical.

These findings of SLA research make pretty bleak reading for language teachers. They suggest that learning develops by processes not accessible to teaching. We can neither control nor predict what is to be learned, and there is a great deal about language that we cannot begin to teach because it is not adequately described. But in spite of this the research suggests that instruction does contribute to learning (see, for example, Long 1988). It may not have a direct and predictable impact, but it does seem to make learning more efficient. We are left with two

major questions. Why does learning progress in a manner, which seems to be independent of teacher input and learner directed efforts? If instruction does not have a direct effect on learning what sort of effect does it have? How is it beneficial?

## Language as a meaning system

What happens when young children are learning their first language? It seems that in the early stages of learning their language is largely lexical. It consists of strings of words put together with minimal syntax. Here is an example. My granddaughter, Lana, told her first story at the age of about three. Lana lives in south London. Just round the corner from her house there is a police-training centre, which among other things trains police horses. Lana’s father, William, is a keen gardener. Every so often he goes round to the police training school to collect manure for his garden. This is Lana’s story:

Lana daddy horsey.  
Man up.  
Horsey poo.  
Daddy poo bag.  
Lana daddy home.

At first sight this story seems to be completely non-grammatical. But it does have a very basic grammar.

We interpret Lana’s first utterance as meaning that Lana and daddy did something to a horsey. If Lana had said *Horsey daddy Lana* we would have interpreted this quite differently. So Lana recognises that the structure of the English clause is SVC (subject + verb + complement) taking a complement to stand for any final element. But in order to understand Lana’s story

we need to know a good deal about the context. This is because Lana does not have control of the grammar of orientation. It is the grammar of orientation, which enables us to relate our message precisely to the context and to relate the elements of the message to one another.

If, for example, Lana had begun her story with:

The other day daddy and I saw a horse.

This would have told us a lot about the context. The adverbial *the other day* and the past tense form *saw* tell us that she is introducing an anecdote. It is a first person story marked by the use of the pronoun *I*. Her third utterance is *horsey poo*. We assume that it is the same horsey, but Lana has done nothing to help us towards this assumption. She has not said ***The horsey did a poo***. So Lana does not have the grammatical wherewithal to make her message clear, to relate it to the context of telling and to relate one element of the story to another—i.e., the first mention of *horsey* to the second mention. The grammar of orientation, involving, among other things, adverbials, the tense system and the determiner system, is highly complex and takes a long time to assimilate. For the time being, however, Lana had a workable meaning system without worrying about further niceties.

Lana language is almost entirely structured lexis. It is a string of words put together according to the rules of English clause structure and little more than that. It is tempting to call Lana's language *ungrammatical*, but it would be more accurate perhaps to refer to it as *ungrammaticised*. If we look at the development of a second language it seems to follow along the same lines. The elementary learner's language is characterised by:

- Omission of articles.
- Omission of BE.
- Questions and negatives marked lexically but not structurally.
- Predominance of base form of the verb.

So the elementary learner produces utterances like *Where you go? I like play golf* and so on. They have a viable meaning system, but it is one, which makes heavy demands on the listener.

In 1975 Michael Halliday published a book about his young son learning his first language, English. We normally think of children as learning to speak or learning to talk, but Halliday's book was significantly entitled *Learning How to Mean*. The acquisition of language is seen as the acquisition of a meaning system. Long before young children produce recognisable words they are able to make themselves understood, to signal hunger, pain, or delight. Soon they begin to string words together in the way we saw with Lana's story. As the child develops intellectually, this places more demands on the language system. Similarly as the child engages in more complex social relations the language system grows to cope with the new demands. What we see is a developing meaning system, which grows gradually more precise and complex.

Halliday sees language as functional. It exists to meet functional demands, and it is shaped and developed according to those demands. There are three *metafunctions*: ideational, textual and interpersonal. It is an oversimplification but we can see the ideational function as being concerned with the communication of a basic message. The textual function tailors the language to make the message readily accessible to a given listener or reader. The interpersonal function is concerned

with the presentation of the self. How do we want to appear to our interlocutors? Do we want to promote solidarity? Or do we want to assert our difference? Do we want to be distant or intimate? Do we want to be polite or aggressive?

We can think in terms of communicative priorities. The first priority is to get our message across. To do what we want to get done with language. Lana's story was reasonably successful in achieving this. The second priority is to take account of our listener or reader, to make the message readily accessible. Lana had few options to draw on in this regard. She could make herself understood to a sympathetic listener who had a close knowledge of the background and context of her story, but would have been difficult for anyone else to understand. In terms of the interpersonal Lana had a range of non-linguistic devices, a grave demeanour indicating the weight of her story and a winning smile when this was recognised. But she had very little in the way of linguistic devices. She would probably have told the story in pretty much the same words to a variety of listeners in a variety of circumstances.

## The tension between form and meaning

I referred to Lana's story as ungrammaticised rather than ungrammatical, and suggested that in the same way we could describe the language of elementary learners as ungrammaticised. If we see learners as developing a meaning system this would help to explain some of the findings of SLA research, which seem to fly in the face of common sense. Why is there no predictable relationship between teaching and learning? This may be because they are aiming at different things. Teaching looks to expand the learner's ability to produce acceptable sentences in the target language, whereas the

learner is aiming to produce a more efficient meaning system. The way language develops, both the first and subsequent languages suggests that we are natural meaning makers rather than natural sentence makers, a distinction that is developed at some length by Brazil (1995: 2). If this is the case then it is not surprising that learners have different priorities from teachers. Learners will take teaching input and adapt it according to the priorities of the developing meaning system. At the earliest stages they will accord a relatively low priority to the grammar of orientation, and they will mark things like interrogatives lexically rather than structurally. They will have little regard for elements like the terminal 's' which is largely redundant in terms of meaning.

If we are to take account of this tension between learning and meaning we need to see things from the learner's point of view. We need to work towards the rapid development of an effective meaning system, and, at the same time, provide the learner with incentives to refine that system in a way that entails a progressively more sophisticated grammar.

## The role of task-based methodology

Let us look briefly at a task-based teaching sequence and see how it might be used to recognise the value of the meaning system while at the same time encourage the development of the grammatical system.

### Stage 1: A prediction task:

You are going to read a newspaper article about someone trying to rob a shop. Here are some ideas to help you with the story:

**The characters:** a shopkeeper; her two children; a man; an eight-year-old boy; and the police.

**The setting:** a corner shop just outside Manchester.

**The props:** a balaclava helmet; a plastic carrier bag; and a pistol

**What they said:**

**The shopkeeper:** “As I gave him his change a man came in”  
“I am not sure whether it was real or not”

“He threw a plastic carrier bag at me, pointed a gun at me and told me to put everything in.”

**The police:** “We are taking this very seriously, as we would any robbery involving a firearm...”

Work in groups and guess what happened in the story?

Compare your ideas with others in your group. Try to include all the things shown above in your story

As we shall see this is the first of a three-phase task cycle. We will call this first phase the task phase. It involves students in an exchange of meanings as they try to predict the story. The outcome of the activity is the story, but there will be a lot of language used in working towards the story. Learners will be obliged to improvise much of the language used. They are producing language spontaneously and at times will be stretched beyond the language they can use with confidence.

### Stage 2: Preparation.

Once you have decided on your story, write down a few notes to help you tell your story to the class. Do not write more than ten words.

Now get ready to tell your story.

### Stage 3: Report

Representatives of the groups tell their stories to the class.

These phases of the task cycle are quite different. Students know that the *report* phase will be, in a sense, a *public performance*. The spokesman for the group will be talking to the class as a whole, not in the privacy of a small group who are all working together. They have already decided on their story so they have time to think about how the story will be worded. In other words they have both a reason to think about form and also the time to do so. We considered above a series of communicative priorities:

Basic message	→	Concern for reader/listener	→	Presentation of self
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At the first phase of the task cycle the primary concern is with basic meaning. There will be relatively little concern with the form of the message. This is appropriate to the circumstances of the task. Learners are working in a small group and are highly tolerant of one another’s language. They are building up the story bit by bit, providing the context as they go along. There is relatively little need to string together an independently coherent story. In the preparation and report phases the priority shifts to a concern for the listener and a concern with the presentation of self. The class is a much more public setting than the group. They will want to give a good account of themselves in speaking in this relatively public setting. They will also need to call on the resources of the language to make their story explicit to an audience, which did not have access to the gradual development of the story. In order to do this

the learners at **Stage 2** will take time to phrase their message carefully, moving towards what they believe to be accurate in terms of English. Although this involves a focus on form I prefer to think of it as a focus on language *development*. I see a focus on form as teacher initiated and teacher led, while a focus on development is student initiated and student led. At this stage of the task cycle students will be adapting their language in ways, which make sense to them, not in ways that are imposed on them by the teacher. They will not be concerned only with accuracy. They will also want to retain forms of the language that they can produce with speed and fluency.

We have here a teaching sequence, which is in line with natural developmental processes. At the first stage, the task learners are encouraged to make the best use of the language they already have—they are encouraged to improvise. In the preparation stage they will experiment. They will pool their knowledge and look for the best way to express their ideas. In the final, report stage they will consolidate. They will adjust their language to meet the demands of the new communicative context, drawing on their improvised performance and incorporating into it as much as they reasonably can of the language proposed during the experimental preparation stage. At this stage they will have to make decisions as to how much new language they can incorporate and still offer a fluent performance.

## Summary

If communication is primarily lexical learners will have ample incentive to increase their lexical store. But what can we do to encourage grammatical development? We showed in the previous section how a task-based sequence increases the demands on the learners' meaning system in such a way as to

drive them towards a more syntactically complex formulation. We can also offer a language focus to prepare the way for development. We saw in **Section 1** that it is not possible for learners to respond immediately to new input. They cannot simply acquire new language forms and incorporate them at once in their spontaneous output. Form focused work, then, should aim not at immediate mastery, but at preparing the way for future development. This suggests that we should put more emphasis on language exploration, on consciousness-raising, than has previously been the case. Learners should be encouraged to familiarise themselves with the texts they have been exposed to and to mine these texts for language that they can use to develop in the future. We cannot rely predominantly on a presentation methodology, which offers learners language, which purports to be ready made to meet their immediate needs. We should encourage them instead to look critically at language. Ideally we need to identify a range of teaching strategies, which will provide learners with guidance and encourage them to work out and learn the system for themselves.

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