Review of Teresa Pica’s “Integrating Content-based and Task-based Approaches for Teaching, Learning and Research”

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Teresa Pica’s article points out a very important trend in today’s teaching world: “Use of content-based and task-based approaches that engage learners in activities authentic to their communicative, academic and professional interests and goals”. In other words, learners’ participation in meaning-based tasks generates many of the linguistic, communicative and cognitive processes which ultimately lead to successful language learning. The author has grounded her research on humanistic approaches.

Ms. Pica elaborates her statement by describing the learning processes in the form of input, feedback and production, which suggest the need of task design. Just meaningful input is not enough; adjustment in the content area such as repeat or reformulation of the input, delivery slow down, and visual highlighting are logical ways to improve their perceptual saliency as well. Besides these positive evidences, negative evidence or corrective evidence such as reformulating and recasting by the interlocutors appear to work more quickly since they provide opportunities for learners to produce and modify their output towards both comprehensibility and accuracy. In sum, these “input, feedback and production processes” have shown that each has a contribution to make towards developing an effective approach to the integration of content and language. Since form-based interventions fit so comfortably in the content interaction, learners even do not notice that they are learning the language forms and thus master them naturally.

Based on the above background knowledge, the article provides valuable information about how to create and design language-based tasks out of meaning-focused texts taken from the subject-content curriculum. The goal of the tasks should be driven to engage language learners in meaningful communication in order to solve problems, complete projects, and reach decisions. Based on this principle, many classroom programs such as “Spot the Difference”, “Jigsaw”, and “Grammar Communication” have shown to be feasible, because information exchange and information gap tasks are structures in those programs. But until recently, the construction of task-based language has been a theoretical ideal with limited applications; educational standard barriers set up by ministries of education make the task hard to perform, too. Therefore educators need to enhance the situation. First, a researcher needs to collaborate with a classroom teacher in creating and designing tasks. Second, these task directions should be clear, and begin with a purpose statement. In designing tasks, extensive preparation work needs to be done and is labor-intensive, but the
results of students’ success will pay off.

Last, the author discusses findings on the implementation of these tasks. Ms. Pica summarizes the last two study results in her article. The first study is done for an American culture course. Another subsequent study compares the impact on Second Language Acquisition (SLA) of three types of tasks used in another content-based language course on contemporary American culture. Implicit and explicit control pairs are used for comparison. Through pre-, interim, and post-testings, findings reveal that learners in each pair make weekly progress. The duration and extension of the intervention of tasks are crucial for learning as well. In conclusion, tasks that integrate many of the strategies that teachers use help learners greatly.

We can find many similar points of view in Dr. Xiaohong Wen’s language input chapter of her book “Studies of Chinese Language Acquisition by English Speakers” (2008). Successful Chinese study requires meaningful and comprehensible input for acquisition. When students’ attention focuses on the meaning of tasks or content, their attention span will extend and their interest level will increase. But in the meantime, students are mastering the language forms or grammar spontaneously. The interactive nature of input will facilitate language intake, the implicit knowledge system, and finally produce better output.

Ms. Pica’s theory has direct application in Chinese teaching. The creation of Chinese Immersion School in Houston where Chinese language is used for different subject-content learning is the best example of Pica’s theory. As we all know, Chinese as a second language has gained great popularity in the United States in recent years, but mastery of it is not that easy. Many students quit after a year or two’s study. Why? The answer is that students lack a content-based environment in which to participate in more language-focused, meaning-based tasks. While in the Chinese Immersion School, students’ Chinese grammatical development or “interlanguage (IL) confidence system will be more mature” (Xiaohong Wen, 2008) when their subject content is encoded in Chinese. As students become proficient in their subjects, their Chinese would become proficient as well. This immersion school is still an experiment and I believe it will generate great results in a few years. I think this school would be an ideal target for language researchers. Of course, Chinese learned through different subjects are rare examples. Most Chinese learning occurs through Chinese curricula themselves, which are task and content driven also. Pica addresses these as well. But if she would elaborate it with more concrete details, the article would be better.

Ms. Pica’s research has profound impact on STARTALK programs as well. It is the backbone of STARTALK’s spirit. Only task-based curricula with meaningful content are acceptable in this program. Instructors are trained and required to create and design interesting activities and assessments that involve students and instructors to exchange information. Pica’s task design principle also serves as a guideline for our Chinese curriculum design. For example, the information exchange and information gap tasks are now widely adopted by Chinese teaching. Many of Pica’s teaching activities can be used as reference tools for our Chinese instructors. I can’t agree more with Ms. Pica.