

Do Language-Tasks Contribute to the Learning of Beginning-Level Chinese? A Case-Study from a Children's after-school CFL Class in Denmark

Rui Bao

Aalborg University/ Aalborg, Denmark

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ABSTRACT

Language-tasks, as part of a Communicative Teaching Approach to foreign language teaching, have been frequently promoted in current second or foreign language teaching classrooms. Although language-tasks were introduced many years ago, language researchers still do not agree on the definitions and possible effects of language-tasks on foreign language acquisition. This has not, however, prevented foreign language teachers, syllabus designer and researcher from exploring the use and effects of language-tasks. On the contrary, it seems to have inspired them. Some language researchers argued that language-tasks provide students with better opportunities for foreign language acquisition than other approaches. In recent years, a wide range of research has shown strong evidence of the benefits of tasks on foreign language acquisition (Long, 1989, 1996; Duff, 1986; Pica & Doughty, 1985) and it may be one of the most important explanations of its popularity. However, it is worth mentioning that a majority of these positive findings are derived from adult learners, at an intermediate proficiency level (Bygate et al., 2001) and in laboratory or controlled ESL contexts (e.g., Skehan & Foster, 2005). Because of the good results with adult learners, some teachers have, unreflecting, taken the benefits of tasks for granted and adopted them as a panacea in foreign language classrooms. One needs to, however, ask oneself whether these findings have value for all kinds of learners and situations. A few studies have been conducted in other contexts than the above mentioned, and these studies have indeed made a number of challenges in relation to the use of tasks in foreign language teaching and learning visible. Swan (2005), for instance, mentions that the use of tasks is considerably less effective for the systematic teaching of new language; Bruton (2005) indicates that the effects of tasks in secondary school foreign language classrooms are relatively limited. Carless (2007) argues that the use of tasks has to be adapted to local school contexts in order to be effective. These studies indicate a need to rethink the use of tasks and their suitability in different contexts, and this seems not least to be true for beginning-level child learners of non-European languages. To this end, this paper aims to explore the feasibility and suitability of the use of tasks in two Danish children's after-school beginning-level Chinese classes. Qualitative data, including interviews with students and transcriptions of audio- and video-recordings on completing assigned tasks among students, are used in this study in order to get an in-depth understanding of the extent of effects of tasks on Chinese classroom. This study confirms previous findings that the use of tasks is positive in terms of increasing student's participation, peer interaction and their assistance. It also shows how the interplay of various factors has an impact on the effects of tasks in beginning-level Chinese classroom. Finally, a number of tentative suggestions for the use of tasks with young beginning learners in Denmark are proposed. This paper seeks to explore the following questions:

RQ 1 What effects does the use of tasks have on after-school beginning level Chinese classroom?

RQ 2 What factors impact on the use of tasks in after-school beginning level Chinese classroom?

RQ 3 What adaptations might make it more suitable to the use of tasks in after-school beginning level Chinese classroom?