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Engaging Learning Processes: Implications for the Use of Second Language Tasks

To round out our discussion of the role of tasks in second language learning, we re-situate issues raised in this section in relation to broader conceptualisations of learning in two ways. In this, we:

• revisit aspects of learning and problem-solving;
• revisit issues of general learning processes.

In both cases, we then narrow the focus again to:

• highlight key factors in understanding ways that tasks can relate to second language learning,

first, by revisiting aspects of learning and problem-solving; and second, by revisiting the issue of general learning processes. In both cases, we narrow the focus again to highlight key factors in understanding ways in which tasks can relate to second language learning.

6.1 Real-world activities, holistic tasks and learning: some issues

As we have seen, one issue raised repeatedly since Dewey is how pedagogy can be related to real-world activity. In what ways can the slipstream of real-world experience be appropriately harnessed as a tool for learning? One dimension worth exploring is the element of structure already inherent in some types of real-world activity, and the elements of structure inherent in the sequences in which those activities may be typically encountered. Lave (1990), in a study of tailors’ apprentices learning in the context of the workplace, describes how the apprentices worked
through a progression of workplace experiences starting with activities that provided access to *overall* goals for performance. For example, by starting with tasks like finishing and ironing completed garments the apprentices were able to develop an understanding of the expected requirements and standards for the whole task, including level of finish and the shape of components. From this they typically moved on to activities providing access to requirements for *particular* performances, for example, specific procedures for constructing garments. The apprentices’ workplace learning thus appeared to progress from engagement with low accountability tasks (some tolerance of error) to engagement with high accountability tasks (no tolerance of errors because of significant consequences). In citing Lave’s study, it is not our intention to imply that there is a necessary connection between apprenticeship models of learning and the use of tasks in second language pedagogy. Rather, what is of interest is that inherent in the progression described by Lave is a movement that starts with a focus on ‘the big picture’ – the demands of the whole task – and continues towards a focus on the details of its parts. The ‘whole to parts’ progression illustrated here is an option that might be usefully exploited in the use of tasks for classroom learning (see Chapters 7 and 9).

However, as Ericsson and Hastie (1994) point out, we also need to take into account that, beyond a certain point, learning in real-world situations may be less efficient and less effective than in deliberately structured learning situations. Ericsson and Hastie identify two reasons for this. First, in everyday activities – whether in work or play – learning opportunities may occur randomly and many of them only occasionally. Second, whether in work or play, the purposes and rewards of the activity are generally not conducive to learning. In work, the main demand is for efficiency, while in play the search for the pleasures of ‘flow’ leads the participant away from practice at eliminating errors. Both factors work against learning. A pedagogy that uses holistic or real-world activities in the classroom thus needs to take this in account.

A number of findings from the study of problem-solving highlight more precisely what it is that needs to be taken into account and how. In a survey of studies of children’s cognitive development, Ellis and Siegler (1994) highlight factors that seem significant in children’s development in problem-solving in their mother tongue. Interestingly, a number of the issues that Ellis and Siegler bring together could be related to a number of the themes we have been highlighting. With this mind, we briefly summarise some of the issues they raise and explore their potential relevance for the use of tasks in second language learning.