

## Effectiveness of Collaborative Language Tasks in Language Teaching and Learning

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### ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the application of collaborative language tasks in classrooms teaching Cantonese as a second language in Hong Kong. An action research was carried out in a Cantonese classroom in Hong Kong. In this research, eighty beginning adult learners from different countries were studied for ten weeks. Classroom observation, questionnaires and interviews were used to look at learners' views about using collaborative tasks in language classrooms. Questionnaires and interviews results show that students have positive views about collaborative tasks. Classroom observation data show that students have made use of communication strategies, such as probing for additional information and rephrasing of questions in order to finish the tasks.

**Keywords:** task-based teaching; collaborative tasks; pragmatic based teaching; Chinese; Cantonese; teaching Cantonese as a second language

## INTRODUCTION

### *Teaching Cantonese as a Second Language in Hong Kong with a socio-pragmatic approach*

Teaching Chinese as a second language (CSL) is expanding in different parts of the world in recent years. In CSL field, there are lots of discussions and comparisons (Richards & Rodgers 1986) between structuralism (Chomsky, 1957) and socio-cultural theories about language teaching and learning approaches in language teaching (Searle, 1969; Hymes, 1972; Gumperz, 1972; Widdowson, 1978; Vygotsky, 1986). Structuralists focus on language form. They suggest that a language contains a set of rules, rules of pronunciation, rules of grammar, etc. and as a result, learning of a language means understanding and producing the language according to these rules. Teachers with such a view will consider accuracy and correctness of linguistic forms as the main focus in classroom activities. In comparison, socio-cultural theories focus on language use. Questions like, “can the students use the target language to communicate?”, “how fluent and proficient students can use the language in real life settings?”, “how could teachers improve students’ language use in different real life settings?” are some of the major concerns. Socio-cultural theorists suggest that languages are learnt for communication, for establishing social network and for accomplishing real life tasks.

Language views can be reflected in language textbooks, curriculum planning and teachers’ classroom activities. Some important literatures in the CSL field in recent years (Jin, 2006; Zhao, 2009) advocate pragmatic views and emphasize that correctness of language forms can only solve the basic problems of “what to say”. However, “how to say”, “to whom you are talking”, “in what situation you are talking”, “when to say” and “why you are talking” are important in determining the successfulness of communication. Following the pragmatic views of language teaching and learning, teacher incorporating keywords in teaching Chinese as a foreign language nowadays are “proficiency based” and “pragmatic based”. Being a sub-field in CSL, teachers teaching Cantonese as a second language in Hong Kong follows the pragmatic notion (Sapir, 1921, 1929; Gumperz, 1972; Hymes, 1972) and emphasizes sociolinguistic competence when designing the curriculum.

It has been almost 200 years since Robert Morrison, a London missionary, started learning Cantonese (Bolton, 2003; Lee, 2005). Each year there are expatriates working and living in Hong Kong trying to learn the language. There are also learners of Cantonese coming to Hong Kong every year to learn the language. This paper demonstrates and discusses an action research on the implementation of pragmatic-based collaborative tasks in language classrooms for adult learners of Cantonese as a second language in Hong Kong throughout a semester.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Collaborative language tasks in action Research*

The pragmatic views of language teaching and learning have guided teaching Chinese as a foreign language to develop “proficiency based” and “pragmatic based” approaches. Based on such views, the issue “what can the students do?” is more important than “what have the students learnt?” In view of this, The Chinese Language Centre at the Chinese University of Hong Kong has set up the target learning outcomes for CSL students based on the socio-pragmatic notion of language teaching. All the program outcomes (PO) are adopted from *ACFTL* speaking proficiency guidelines (ACFTL, 2012). PO1 indicates the oral proficiency of Novice standard. PO2 shows students’ oral proficiency of Intermediate level and PO3 shows the oral proficiency of Advanced level learners.

(PO1: Novice level) Students are able to ask and respond to simple questions, convey minimal meaning and satisfy a very limited number of immediate needs.

(PO2: Intermediate level) Students are able to participate in simple conversations on predictable topics, obtain information by asking and answering questions, combine learned materials to communicate personal meanings, can satisfy basic personal needs and social demands.

(PO3: Advanced-Advanced High) Students are able to participate actively in conversations on various topics in some formal and most informal settings, handle a wide variety of speaking tasks with communicative strategies, deal effectively with unanticipated complications in oral communication, satisfy the requirements of school and work situations.

With the program outcomes in mind, all classroom activities and tasks are designed to help achieve the learning outcomes. David Nunan has laid down the foundation of task-based approach. Classroom activities in the Cantonese curriculum follow task-based language teaching methodology (Nunan, 2004).

“My own definition is that a pedagogical task is a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form. The tasks should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right with a beginning, a middle and an end.” (Nunan, 2004, p. 4)

Swain (1999), and in her later works, expands Nunan's ideas of pedagogical tasks. She distinguishes two types of tasks, one type includes "tasks focusing on linguistic form" and another type consists of "collaborative tasks focusing on meaning-making" (p.45). In CSL field, Jin (2006) gives guidelines on effective tasks design and suggests 15 language activity types in CSL teaching.

In this action research, three language tasks, (1) role-playing, (2) treasure hunt and (3) small projects, were focused in this paper. These three task activities were selected because they fit Swain's (1999) descriptions of collaborative tasks.

"Collaborative tasks generate unintended consequences. Students carry out tasks according to their own needs and goals. They may not learn what the teacher intended them to learn, but nevertheless they learn what, given their state of content and language knowledge, they are able to learn. Often together, students accomplish what they could not have accomplished alone."  
(Swain, 1999, p.60)

These three tasks involve "pair and group communicative activities" (Antón, 1999) and can also encourage students to produce a large amount of linguistic outputs and create opportunities for negotiation of meaning and form during communication (Swain, 1999).

#### *Role-playing activities*

*Role-playing* refers to the changing of one's behavior to assume a role. The Oxford English Dictionary defines role-playing as "the changing of one's behavior to fulfill a social role". A role-playing language activity is an activity in which the participants assume the roles of characters and collaboratively create stories. Participants determine the actions of their characters based on their characterisation, and the actions succeed or fail according to a formal system of rules and guidelines. Students may improvise freely; their choices shape the direction and outcome of the activities. The action research focuses on two language situations in the role-playing activities, one is a shopping scene and the other is a "finding-the-way" scene.

#### *Treasure Hunt*

The *treasure hunt* activity in the action research took place inside the university by finding some of the "treasure". The "treasure" can be set as a building, a site or an object in a designated location. The treasure hunt activities help students to learn directional verbs, building names and cultural spots. Different groups of students are given different "treasures to hunt". Students need to interact with the real world in order to "hunt the treasure". In the planning stage, they need to plan the initial route and plan their communication strategy with their group members. In the treasure finding phase, students need to construct and reconstruct the information as well as negotiate and renegotiate within the group while they are working on the task.

The activity takes place inside the university. In the pre-task phase, students firstly obtain a map of the University with the labeling of major buildings, supermarket, bus stops, canteens, bookstores and grocery store, etc. In the pre-task classes, teacher trains the students with a list of

vocabulary items and useful sentence patterns, such as “where is...?”, “go straight”, “turn right”, etc. Then, teacher gives photos of the “treasure” students need to hunt.

When carrying out the task, students go out with the team members and find the way by asking people at the university in Cantonese until they can find the target “treasure”. When they successfully find the “treasure”, they need to take photos of the “treasure” using their mobile phone. After they have successfully “hunted the treasure”, students need to get back to the classroom within the designated time. They need to report to other groups about how they can “hunt the treasure”, by explaining the actual route and teach other groups how to get to the “treasure location”. Other teams and the class teacher give feedback in the final phase of the task, i.e. reporting the result, sharing the difficulties or interesting experience in the hunting process.

#### *Small project*

In this activity, students work in groups of two to three students on simple research topics. Students interview 5-10 Cantonese speakers and do some surveys based on thematic topics, as such “the most favorite food of Hong Kong people”, “how do you go to work/school” or “the most beautiful place in Hong Kong”. Students need to determine their own research topic among themselves with the help of the class teacher and to work on the research using the target language. After gathering the data, students work as a group to analyze the data and present the result in the language classroom.

In this action research, we would like to find out how successful the collaborative tasks work in the CSL context and how students think about the tasks and activities. An action research was carried out to see students’ views about the pragmatic based collaborative tasks. The research focuses on four classes consisting of a total of eighty adult learners (twenty learners per class) who are from different countries (Japan, Korea, U.S., Spain, & Australia in this study). All students in the research are complete beginners with no Chinese background. The classes lasted were conducted for ten weeks and there were two hours of class per week concentrating on four topics which include themes such as, “introducing yourself”, “ordering food”, “asking direction” & “understanding Hong Kong”. The course was designed with a combination of in-class language input and collaborative language tasks (role-playing and treasure hunt). Towards the end of the course, students were asked to finish one *project* as part of the course assessment.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

At the end of this 10-week class, questionnaires were distributed to the students. The full set of questionnaire used is shown in Appendix I. The results are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Post course questionnaires result (N=80, score: 1 is very disagree and 6 is very agree)

Questions	Mean Score	Max score
Q1. Do you understand the content before the course?	1	6
Q2. Do you understand the content after the course?	3.8	6
Q3. Is the course content valuable to your language or personal development	6	6
Q4. Is new knowledge gained?	4	6
Q5. Are specific skills/techniques gained?	4	6

The descriptive statistic data from the questionnaires show that students perceived that they have increased their knowledge of Cantonese and they think that the course helped them gain specific language skills. Question 1, asking whether the students have prior knowledge or not, has a low average score (1/6), which means students did not have knowledge about the language before the course. Question 2, 4 and 5 show that students have gained some new knowledge and skills after the course (with an average score around 4/6). Students think that the course content is valuable to their language or personal development (6/6), as shown in Question 3.

A follow up semi-structured interview in casual setting has been carried out by the teacher with all the students in eight focus groups (each group with ten students). Interview questions (shown in Appendix II) were set to ask about how students feel about the course and the collaborative tasks. Students said in the interview that “we talked a lot in Cantonese before and during the tasks”. These comments show that most of the class time is dominated by students’ talk rather than teacher lecturing about the linguistic knowledge. Students agreed that “the class is practical”, “I can order food now”. Such comments indicate that learners appreciated the practicality of the course which can help them practice using the language in real language situations. This is a concept advocated by Zhao (2009) know as, “learning by doing” which is one of the important elements in pragmatic approach in CSL teaching and learning. The results correspond to Swain’s (1999) that teaching of grammatical points and vocabulary should be connected to the language situations and functions they serves, without which teaching grammatical structure alone is not enough to develop native speaker ‘s level of proficiency in the second language. Classes with collaborative tasks are creating a learning environment in which students work closely with group members. This kind of collaborative learning experience motivates students to interact because the language tasks require students to work in pairs. Students needed to participate as a group during the learning process and presenting the *Small projects* at the end of the course. Students said in the interview that “it is fun and practical working with group members”, “I learn from my fellow classmates”. When carrying out the collaborative tasks, students noticed gaps in their knowledge when they tried to express their intended meaning. Students needed to search for solution or to seek help from their fellow classmates. Swain (1999) also mentions that students can be made aware of their own linguistic shortcomings and develop strategies for solving them by working with other group members

during collaborative tasks.

Table 2 below is an extract of classroom conversation during a role-playing activity. During Turn 9 and Turn 10, the students are teaching each other new words and helping each other by improvising meanings of new words by providing English explanations in order to finish the communicative task.

Table 2 Episode of role-playing activities (in Yale Cantonese Romanization with English explanations)

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**Finding-the-way scene in “role-playing” – classroom observation data**

**Scenario:**  
Student 2 is going to visit Student 1 but does not know the way and call up Student 1

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Turn 1:	Student 1:	Wái! (Hello!)
Turn 2:	Student 2:	ā wái,... [laugh] (Hello!)
Turn 3:	Student 1:	Wòhng síujé, néih yìhgā hái bīndouh a? haih mhaih hái deihtit,... deihtit jaahm a? (Ms Wong, where are you now? Are you at the train station?)
Turn 4:	Student 2:	haih la! Ngóh yìhgīng hái deihtit jaahm. (Yes, I am already at the train station.)
Turn 5:	Student 1:	óh, chíng néih heui Exit B. (then, please go to Exit B.)
Turn 6:	Student 2:	nīdouh yìhgīng haih Exit B a, daahnhaih nīdouh yáuh hóudō Exit B, ngóh yiu heui mātyéh exit B a? (It is Exit B here, but there are many Exit Bs, which Exit B should I go to?)
Turn 7:	Student 1:	B sāam, mgōi. (B3, please.)
Turn 8:	Student 2:	ngóh hóu lucky, yānwaih ngóh hái B sāam fuhgahn. (I am very lucky, because I am near B3.)
Turn 9:	Student 1:	hóu! Néih yiu daap dihntāi, escalator, séuhngheui deihtit jaahm noihibihn. néih yiu gwo máhlouh, cross the road, gám singtóng yauhgihn yáuh yātgāan hóudaaih ge sēungchēuhng. (Good! You need to take the escalator, [in English it means] escalator, go up and go out of the train station. You need to cross the road, cross the road, then to the right of the church there is a big shopping mall.)

Turn 10: Student 2: ngóh gindóu la, ngóh gindóu “waihōng”, means “Wellcome shop”. ngóh gin hóudō poutáu hái néih ūkkéi fuhgahn, néih hóu hōisām haih mmhaih a?  
(I can see. I can see “Wellcome shop”, [in English] means “Wellcome shop”. I see many shops near your home, you should be very happy, right?)

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The classroom observation data in Table 2 shows that students have acquired the linguistic skills in the designated language situations. Students successfully completed the tasks with appropriate use of lexical items, grammatical structure, as well as communication strategies, such as probing for additional information and rephrasing of questions when necessary.

## CONCLUSION

The action research shows that collaborative language tasks motivate students to engage in collaborative learning (Smith & MacGregor, 1992; Harding-Smith, 1993; Chiu, 2000). Learners in this study think that the collaborative language tasks can help them learn the target language. The limitation of this research is that it only looks at students' views about the implementation of collaborative language tasks but it does not measure how much students have been improving with the help of the collaborative tasks. The next research direction is to conduct experimental studies to examine students' improvement in language proficiency after the implementation of collaborative tasks in a curriculum by comparing control groups without any collaborative task being carried out.

The collaborative tasks work well with the teaching of Cantonese as a second language in Hong Kong. Collaborative tasks can motivate students to use the target language in real life situations. One reason for the success is that teaching and learning Cantonese as a second language in Hong Kong does not involve an external public examination, like TOFEL, TOEIC, IELTS in the English language teaching field. As such, Cantonese teachers and learners do not have exam pressure. Both students and teachers do not have to meet certain examination requirement, but just focus on improving students' oral proficiency. Teachers can design classroom activities based on the goals which focus on language proficiency and communicative skills. The emphasis of pragmatic views in Cantonese learning and teaching in Hong Kong matches the purpose of learning Cantonese. Dyer Ball, one of the successful learners of Cantonese in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, stated that the major aim of studying language is “to facilitate his daily intercourse, not with books, but with people” (Ball, 1883). Our job, as a language teacher, not only convey knowledge and coach the students by correcting mistakes, but also to help students cultivate students' senses in real life situations and engage in life-long learning (Kuh et al., 1991; Meyers & Jones, 1993).

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**Appendix I**

Sample questionnaire

**Post Course Evaluation**

Name : \_\_\_\_\_ (optional) \_\_\_\_\_  
 Date : \_\_\_\_\_

**I. The Course**

Please circle your rating  
 Low <----->High

- Not Applicable
1. Knowledge on subject matter  
 To what extent do you understand the content
    - a. before taking the course? 1 2 3 4 5 6 NA
    - b. while taking the course? 1 2 3 4 5 6 NA
  2. Programme  
 To what extent:
    - a. is the meeting/ class time used well? 1 2 3 4 5 6
    - b. is the duration of the class appropriate? 1 2 3 4 5 6
    - c. is the course content valuable to your language or personal development? 1 2 3 4 5 6
  3. Learning  
 To what extent:
    - a. is new knowledge gained? 1 2 3 4 5 6
    - b. are specific skills/techniques gained? 1 2 3 4 5 6
  4. Training setup / aids  
 Please rate:
    - a. Seating arrangement 1 2 3 4 5 6 NA
    - b. Written materials (i.e. handouts, manuals, notes, etc.) 1 2 3 4 5 6 NA
    - c. Audio-visual aids (i.e. video, projector, TV etc.) 1 2 3 4 5 6 NA
  5. Teacher  
 Please rate:
    - a. the preparation work 1 2 3 4 5 6
    - b. the delivery skills & methods used 1 2 3 4 5 6
    - c. the pace 1 2 3 4 5 6
    - d. the effectiveness 1 2 3 4 5 6
  6. Your overall rating of the course now. 1 2 3 4 5 6
  7. To what extent would you recommend this course to other college mates. 1 2 3 4 5 6

8. Which part(s) of the course is (are) most useful?  
 \_\_\_\_\_

9. Which part(s) of the course should be improved? Please state your suggestions.  
 \_\_\_\_\_

10. Please indicate the area(s) that you would like to receive further training by putting a tick in ( )::

Listening ( )

Reading ( )

Speaking ( )

Writing ( )

State the specific topic if possible:

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## **II. Level of Proficiency**

1. What level of Cantonese would you say you have achieved now?

( ) 1. Beginner

( ) 2. False-beginner

( ) 3. Lower Intermediate

( ) 4. Upper Intermediate

( ) 5. Advanced

## **III. Other suggestions**

Do the course change your motivation for, and attitudes to, the learning and using Cantonese?

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Any other comments on the nature and content of the course?

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*Thanks for your comments.*

## **Appendix II**

### Interview questions

1. What are the good aspects of this course?
2. What are the bad aspects of this course?
3. Are the language situations/topics chosen appropriate?
4. Will you use Cantonese in the actual situations after the course?
5. Do you think the language task(s) can help you when you learn the language? In what aspects?
6. Which language task(s) do you like? Why?
7. To what extent do you think the task(s) can help you to learn the language?
8. Do you like group work or do you like to work individually?
9. Do you think your teacher / your fellow students can help you in your learning during the course? In what aspect?
10. Do you have any suggestion(s) to make/offer for this course?