Colloquium

Focusing on the teacher and the students in TBLT for young learners

The aim of this colloquium is to explore research approaches to task-based language teaching (TBLT) for young learners. It includes five studies that examine the effects of TBLT with young learners focussing on either the teacher or the students.

The first two papers examine how teachers implement TBLT with young learners. Oliver, Zhang and Sato report on an eight-month longitudinal study in which they employed detailed field notes and video recordings of informal interviews to investigate how teachers used “focus on form” strategies in their classrooms with children aged 5–9. Zhu presents an collaborative-action research project on the effects of task repetition. She examined a six-week instruction involving different types of tasks with the idea of building the teachers’ confidence and expertise in using tasks.

The next three papers focus on the students. García Mayo and Imaz Agirre report on a study investigating the behaviour of children (aged 11–12) as they engaged in collaborative tasks. They analysed task-modality effects, pair dynamics and the quality of the students’ oral and written output. Pinter adopts a novel approach by asking the children (aged 9–10) in her study to function as the researchers. She reported on how the children prepared short oral presentations and then reflected on both their own and other students’ oral output. Finally, Butler, presents a large-scale study involving semester-long instruction using three different types of tasks with 120 children (aged 10–11). She investigated how inter- and intra-individual factors impacted on the effects of the tasks on the children’s language development. The study addresses the challenges of developing age- and context-appropriate tasks for young learners.

Together, these five papers give us insights into how to implement tasks in classrooms with young learners, as well as how to research the effectiveness of TBLT for such learners. The colloquium concludes with a discussion of the papers’ implications.

Colloquium structure

| 3’   | Introduction (Shintani) |
| 17’  | Paper 1: Learning content, learning language: Children in Australia learning Mandarin as a second language by Oliver, Zhang & Sato |
| 17’  | Paper 2: Task-based language teaching for young learners: A teacher educator’s collaborative action research study by Zhu |
| 17’  | Paper 3: Issues on EFL children's performance in collaborative tasks: Findings and future research agenda by García Mayo & Imaz Agirre |
| 17’  | Paper 4: Children engaging in self-motivated task repetition by Pinter |
| 17’  | Paper 5: Individual variabilities that result when young learners are given grammar instruction tasks by Yuko Goto Butler |
| 10’  | Discussion (Shintani) |
| 20’  | Q&A |
Individual papers

Learning content, learning language: Children in Australia learning Mandarin as a second language
Rhonda Oliver, Celia Zhang & Masatoshi Sato

This study, which is qualitative in design, focuses on teachers using a Content Integrated Language Learning (CLIL) approach to jointly teach content (mathematics, science, physical education, and art) and Mandarin as a second language in a primary school in Western Australia. In particular, it investigates how teachers use ‘focus on form’ strategies in their classrooms; that is, how teachers draw learners’ attention to form of the target language in the course of their content teaching, and the learners’ responses to these strategies. Targeted observations were undertaken longitudinally over a period of 8 months in four classrooms with children aged 5–9 years. Data were collected via detailed field notes and video recordings. In addition, informal interviews were undertaken with the teachers to ascertain their lesson focus, aims of, and reflections about pedagogy. Informed by the classification system developed by Ellis et al. (2001a), the observed FonF episodes (FFE) were coded according to type (i.e., reactive or pre-emptive, teacher or student-initiated, explicit or implicit) and their various characteristics. The student responses within the FFEs were also analysed in depth, along with the teacher cognitions about their pedagogy. The findings show a complex pattern of interaction between teacher and students, highlighting the utility of the CLIL approach for second language learning.

Task-based language teaching for young learners: A teacher educator’s collaborative action research study
Yan Zhu

Despite its prominence in the last four decades, the implementation of TBLT in young learners’ classrooms has been repeatedly reported as a thorny problem. An essential but under-researched issue is how and to what extent on-going, practice-oriented, and in-service teacher education can facilitate teacher designing and implementing tasks in their classrooms. This collaborative action research study reports on a teacher educator’s experience of supporting Lucille (pseudonym), a novice primary school teacher to design, implement, evaluate, and reflectively amend tasks in two repeated lessons for Grade 2 students at a Chinese primary school. During six weeks, the teacher educator provided continuous support to help Lucille design, implement, and modify tasks in two repeated lessons. Also, learning-based, student-based, response-based, and community-based task evaluations were conducted to facilitate reflective practices. Results indicated that Lucille could successfully implement TBLT and reflectively modify her classroom practices. Empirical evidence from the four types of task evaluation boosted the teacher’s confidence in the efficacy of using tasks in young learners’ foreign language classrooms. Moreover, community-based task evaluation provided Lucille and her colleagues with a supportive platform where teacher learning took place.

Issues on EFL children's performance in collaborative tasks: Findings and future research agenda
María del Pilar García Mayo & Ainara Imaz Agirre
This talk will review the main findings of research on collaborative tasks carried out by young EFL learners in a Spanish school and how those findings can inform the current research agendas. Participants in this project were 128 lower-proficiency Primary Education children (age range: 11-12) who completed both oral and oral+written collaborative tasks. Agency in pair formation and learners’ motivation were considered as independent variables across tasks, whereas task modality effects, pair dynamics and quality of the students’ both oral and written output were considered as the foci of the data analysis. Findings showed that young learners are highly sensitive to pair formation method when performing collaborative tasks, which positively reinforces students’ on-task motivation. They also highlighted that by completing collaborative tasks (i) students are able to engage in more oral languaging and, (ii) the quality of the student-generated oral and written output improves. A call will be made for a more integrated perspective of pedagogy and research in order to develop a research agenda that may foster the learning of foreign languages in the classroom.

Children engaging in self-motivated task repetition
Annamaria Pinter

Empirical research on procedural task repetition with adults is abundant but much less is known about children’s L2 task repetition related performances. This talk begins with the summary of the evidence regarding empirical research to date into procedural task repetition. Then I present some findings from a small scale study in which I encouraged novice child researchers to prepare a short oral presentation about their work at the end of their research journey. The children were 9-10 years old and were L2 speakers of English of varying levels of proficiency. They were given tablet devices to video-record their presentations, and, in preparation for the final presentation they all spontaneously rehearsed their talk (i.e. oral monologic task) while their peers were listening attentively, offering immediate feedback and assistance. All children had filmed their oral output multiple times until they were satisfied with the resulting final oral performance. Mediating the children’s performances, the tablet device afforded repeated opportunities to practise and reflect on one’s own and others’ oral outputs. The broad implication of this study for teachers is that ‘dynamic tasks’ have the capacity to promote reflection between repeated performances and thus have the potential to focus learners’ attention on formal aspects of their own and others’ performances.

Individual variabilities that result when young learners are given grammar instruction tasks
Yuko Goto Butler

Although current SLA research informs us that both implicit and explicit instructions are important, it does not address how best to balance implicit and explicit instruction for young learners. In this study, we begin to address this question by focusing on the teaching of the 3rd-person singular –s, a morpheme observed to be difficult for children to acquire by having mere exposure in English-as-a-foreign language settings. Three tasks which differed in their degrees of explicitness were introduced to 120 fifth-grade students (ages 10-11) in Japan. Task 1 directed attention primarily to meaning, task 2 directed attention to forms without explicit explanations, and task 3 was a metalinguistic task to discover the rules of this morphosyntax. A semester-long implementation of the tasks indicated that there were substantial inter- and intra-individual variabilities (variabilities across individuals as well as within a given individuals’ performance). The effects of the different tasks were influenced
by each student’s developmental level, or what Vygotsky (1978) would describe as their Zone of Approximate Development. When children showed variable responses within a task, introducing and/or repeating explicit tasks turned out to be effective. The paper also addresses challenges for developing age- and context-appropriate tasks for young learners.