

# Role-play and Orientation to Task

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## ロールプレイと「タスクへのオリエンテーション」

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### Abstract

Although a lesson may seem successful when casually observed, it may be a failure when psycholinguistic factors are considered. This paper comments on a college-level lesson using role-play; the students were motivated, hard-working and enthusiastic, yet the underlying purpose of the activity was not well communicated by the instructor. In the end, though the results were carefully prepared and performed, the students did not approach any of the linguistic or pedagogical goals envisioned by the teacher. The discussion is informed by the Vygotskian notion of 'orientation to task.'

**Key words:** role-play, Vygotsky, orientation, task

(Received September 30, 2004)

### 抄 録

一見成功しているように見えるレッスンでも、心理言語学的な要因を考慮すれば、むしろ失敗と考えるべき場合がある。教師が活動の真の目的を学習者に伝えない場合、意欲のある熱心な学習者でもその活動をうまく行えない例が見られた。すなわち、その学生たちは、教師の設定する言語的・教育的な目標に近づくことができなかったことになる。本稿における議論の基盤となる考え方は、「タスクへのオリエンテーション」と呼ばれる概念である。

**キーワード:** ロールプレイ、ビゴツキ、オリエンテーション、タスク

(2004年9月30日 受理)

We've all had one: an active, focused lesson during which the students respond with enthusiasm to the activity we present to them. "That was a successful lesson," a casual visitor might say. But what is success in a language class? This paper investigates why an apparently successful lesson in which students created and performed brief role-plays together was, psycholinguistically speaking, a failure.

Role-play (hereafter RP) activities are popular with most language teachers. The reasons are not surprising: RP has been variously described as motivating (as Bartley, 2002, says, it is "self-rewarding"), entertaining and collaborative. It allows learners to "transcend the experience of memorizing information" (Bartley, 2002) and to apply theoretical knowledge in simulated practical situations. It encourages students to engage with the L2 freely and creatively, and encourages the exploration of options through creative use of language. RP can provide a rich discourse context, allowing practice of language use beyond the considerations of mere form (e.g., it can provide a context for pragmatics, or conversational management). It is, some claim, particularly good for teaching about L2 culture, and involves emotions as well as cognition on the part of the learners, a positive aspect according to recent humanistic trends in curriculum design (Kodotchigova, 2002). It is, above all, a way of introducing 'ordinary conversation' (i.e., peers talking to peers in the L2) into the teacher-dominated language classroom. In many ways, RP offers a solution to the problem identified by Demo:

One problem for second language learners is limited experience with a variety of interactive practices in the target language...one of the goals of second language teaching is to expose learners to different discourse patterns in different texts and interactions. (2001, p.4)

Teachers turn to RP reasonably sure that they are letting the students both enjoy themselves and get in some solidly grounded language practice.

In this paper, I question these assumptions. After an outwardly successful RP-based lesson with a class of Japanese college students, I found myself wondering whether RP really encourages exploration of the L2 and its pragmatic options, as Bartley (2002) enthusiastically claims. When we ask students to participate in RP, what do they actually end up doing? From a Vygotskian perspective, the answer is unsettling. Rather than use RP to explore linguistic, cultural and interactional choices, many 'good' students simply pursue the more common 'school' agenda of 'getting to the right answer' as efficiently as possible.

For years I have used my classroom activity as an informal laboratory to investigate current Vygotskian notions about language pedagogy. The term 'Vygotskian' covers a growing body of theoretical work influenced over the past 40 years by research in

developmental psychology, language acquisition, and cognitive science, though Vygotsky himself lived in the early years of the 20th century. Sometimes the terms *sociocultural theory* and *activity theory* (Lantolf, 2000) are used to refer to the recent elaborations of Vygotsky's original work. In the present discussion, the fundamental Vygotskian notion of *orientation to task* is central. This is not a formal research project. The class described was non-experimental. Indeed, the students were by every ordinary measure highly motivated to participate, cooperative, sufficiently proficient in the L2, and apparently comfortable with the task, the imposed time frame, the instructor, and each other.

### **Orientation to Task**

A full outline of Vygotskian activity theory is well beyond the limits of this paper, but a few crucial points are worth introducing. Activity theory holds that speakers use language to do two things: create the world and control the world. This means that the activity of speaking is not carried out to 'transmit' information to a listener, but to position the self successfully in both the material and discursive environments. Because speaking activity is crucially tied to the context in which it occurs, the researcher can fully understand what any given utterance means only by considering how it is situated in the social, cultural and linguistic setting of its production. Thus, a key assumption that underlies Vygotskian interpretation of linguistic behavior is that the observable aspects of an utterance, which most theories of language acquisition accept unexamined, cannot be taken at face value. Rather, in order to understand what a speaker is 'really' doing with language the researcher must somehow look inside at the internal structure of the speaker's activity.

This assumption has many practical and theoretical consequences. Most relevant to the present discussion is the fact that teachers cannot take for granted that their words, e.g., instructions for a classroom activity, mean the 'same thing' to her students as they do to her. Students will interpret the task—the directions, the goal, the purpose, the possible actions needed to accomplish it—in terms of their own experience and understanding. Thus, while a group of learners might appear to be engaged in the same activity, in fact some of them may be engaged in a task that is in fact quite different from what the teacher had in mind when issuing the instructions. The difference between teacher and student knowledge is particularly striking when novice-level learners must cope with the demands of carrying out an unfamiliar task with limited mastery of a second language. What happened in my 'successful failure' of a class is obvious, from this perspective: I gave instructions that were sufficient only in terms of my own extensive experience and knowledge of RP; I did not bother to help the students understand the task as clearly as I did, and then watched as the instructions were interpreted in terms of the students' own understanding of the purpose of the task.

Specifically, I failed to take into account the importance of the Vygotskian notion of *orientation to task*. In the Vygotskian view, novices (students) learn best when an expert (the teacher) engages with them strategically, mediating their involvement in the task primarily through language. A key strategy typical to the instruction to novices is to give a rough idea of how the expert herself would approach the task at hand (Lantolf, 2000). This does not mean that good teaching boils down to modeling and mimicry, though strategic imitation might be an important part of a beginner's repertoire of learning strategies. Rather, the teacher tries to shift the students from their novice stance—from which the task might seem overwhelming or at least open to crucial misinterpretation—to seeing some of the most useful possible strategies and tools at their disposal. Orientation is how the teacher 'hooks' the beginning learner into her agenda and her expertise. This ability to see the task, if only incompletely, from the expert's point of view—to share her orientation towards it—is a necessary first step in developing mastery (Lantolf, 2000; Roebuck, 2000). Thus, *orientation* refers to the way a learner situates himself vis-à-vis a task. Orientation is not permanently fixed, but establishing it is crucial to the success of formal instruction (Verity, 1992).

Part of being a learner, or a novice, is having no idea of what you don't know, or how what you *do* know relates to the overall demands of the task. A teacher's job can include helping learners become aware of the dimensions of the task, and possible solutions to it, by creating a helpful small picture first (called *prolepsis* in Vygotskian terms). For efficiency's sake, the classroom teacher has to create this working set of shared meanings so that every member of the class, despite their varying proficiencies, histories, goals, motives, levels of engagement, etc., can 'get' what she is saying early on. Otherwise she will need to teach 30 individual lessons in every class. By offering usefully clear and limited metacommentary on the task, she provides a linguistic tool that the students can appropriate for their own use (Ahmed, 1995).

Of course all good teachers know the importance of clarity in instructions. The difference is the crucial Vygotskian recognition that orientation is not transferable. Only engagement with the task itself, experience, can help the learner make sense of the instructions. The Vygotskian instructor accepts the limitations of language at the early stages of learning, realizing that her words of direction only partially represent the complexity of her expert knowledge. She does not assume that every learner can make sense of the words immediately, and is perhaps more willing than a traditional teacher to spend time recognize that, not because she is a nicer person but because she knows how crucial it is to many other things can get in the way of initial understandings.

Orientation towards the expert stance does not cancel out the influence of the learners' own histories and goals. As one researcher in the Vygotskian paradigm reminds

us, research subjects and students alike are not passive recipients of information but active agents and meaning makers (Roebuck, 2000). Although the teacher's instructions may provide a useful starting point for a cognitive understanding of the task, they do not determine student activity. Learners also engage in self-positioning vis-à-vis every task (Roebuck, 2000). As suggested above, the result is that a novice may *appear* to be doing the teacher-assigned task, but in fact be doing something very different. (Importantly, this does not mean that the student throws up his pencil, puts his feet on the desk and falls asleep. He may continue cooperate in every visible way with the instructions. But his true engagement, as marked by his understanding of the purpose of the activity, may be at another level entirely.) Why is it important to know whether the student shares at least to some extent the teacher's definition of task? Because if he doesn't, it may make the next lesson, or the next task, or the next explanation, incomprehensible to him. The issue of orientation to task are crucial not because of student autonomy or lack thereof; rather, they allow the shared understandings—in Vygotskian terms, the *intersubjectivity*—that successful instruction depends upon.

Thus, it should not have been surprising to me that my students participated in RP much as they tended to participate in other classroom tasks: they defined the task as having a 'right' answer; they were oriented more towards 'pleasing the teacher' or 'getting a good mark' than towards 'practicing something difficult in the target language.' They did not, contrary to what I had hoped, seize the opportunity to use RP to explore interesting options for pragmatic or interactional choices.

It is worth noting that Vygotskian interpretations of learner engagement often arouse defensive reactions in teachers: "MY students are cooperative!" "MY students love doing RP (or whatever task is being discussed critically)!" "MY students always participate in everything we do!" The Vygotskian interpretation does not imply any criticism of learners; indeed, it assumes that they cannot NOT participate! However, it tries to point out that what seems to be 'doing RP' on the surface may in fact be 'pleasing the teacher' 'passing the time' 'fulfilling my role as a cooperative college student' 'desperately trying to avoid making a visible mistake in class/in the L2, etc.' College students bring powerful background knowledge and previous experience to our classes. When a teacher assigns RP, as I did in the class I am about to describe, unthinkingly, unreflectively and without due consideration of the importance of creating a shared and useful orientation among participants, the results may be, as they were in my class, sadly hollow.

Yet, frustratingly, this is not a report of a 'bad' lesson. The students without exception responded in a way that would have gladdened any communicative language teacher's heart: they participated actively and eagerly, they attempted to fulfill the letter (if not the spirit) of the instructions, they performed inside the stated time frame, and they listened

with great courtesy and attentiveness to the performances of their classmates. In every way, except the most crucial one, this lesson was a success.

### **Sample Exchanges from the Lesson**

The unit lesson focused on conflict resolution as a strategy for discussing and resolving interpersonal conflicts arising from opposing agendas. Students, after reading through one clear example of conflict resolution, were asked to seek at least a *compromise* and preferably a *transcending* solution to a conflict that they might face in their own lives. Rather than have them discuss solutions to the various conflicts proposed in the book, I selected one of the conflicts and asked the 11 pairs of students to create actual conversations to illustrate the process each group used to reach its solution. A quick definition of the two terms: a *compromise* solution is one which gives each participant partial satisfaction, often couched in terms of 'equal' or 'fair' shares; a *transcending* solution is one in which the problem is redefined and both participants are satisfied fully, if in a different way than originally envisioned. In the Unit materials, the example is given of two sisters who both inherit a beautiful necklace from their grandmother. There are two of them, and one necklace; who should have it? A compromise solution, in which fairness is the ultimate goal, might be to sell the necklace and divide the money exactly in half. This solution retains quantitative equality but completely violates the sentimental value of the inheritance. The transcending solution given in the Unit is that the sisters agree to share custody of the necklace, alternating their use of it over an agreed-upon fixed time. The difference between the two solutions is clear—the transcending solution retains the necklace as a sentimental heirloom in active use, even though nobody ends up actually owning it.

Clearly, a transcending solution demands active thought and active discussion, since it is not mechanistically derived from the obvious factors of the problem situation. Indeed, my main reason for choosing a RP approach to this exercise was to enrich the language-practice aspects of the task. In this year-long discussion course, we use content-based materials to support the development of both vocabulary and conversational fluency. I hoped the students would use the task to explore the pragmatics of disagreement, suggestion, acceptance, rejection, satisfaction and other relevant speech acts in English.

The stated conflict was quite simple: two friends want to take a graduation trip together, but one person wants to go to Hokkaido, the other to Okinawa. How to resolve the conflict? My interest in the students' linguistic performance was geared mostly to the interactive nature of the conversation, rather than to specific structures or vocabulary. I was hoping to be able to watch, in real time, the construction of at least a tentatively transcending solution.

One reason RP works well is the powerful organizing influence of schemas that speakers—students, novice, teachers and experts alike—bring to every discourse situation (Thorne, 2003). RP depends upon students being able to reproduce real life with some degree of mimetic care. One key function of orientation in instruction is to help learners connect existing schemas with the new, unfamiliar task. Unsuccessful orientation, such as I gave, may result in the activation of irrelevant schemas. While I lazily assumed that the students would use their ‘problem-solving’ schemas for the lesson, in the end they tended to draw upon their ‘doing a class exercise well’ schemas instead.

In Vygotskian terms, the ‘goal’ of an activity is not so much a fixed endpoint as a directionality of movement towards an endpoint. I didn’t expect the students to be able to reach a transcending solution easily or even necessarily at all. Rather, I hoped they would see the exercise, as I did, as a chance to engage in exploration and experience. From my perspective, conversations in which the agreement was NOT reached, but in which the reasoning towards the agreement was illustrated, would have been highly useful as language practice, interesting to watch, and supportive to the students’ emerging notion of how conflict resolution works. As Kramsch (2000) points out in her discussion of task orientation and writing, the restrictions of genre (in this case, conflict resolving conversations) highlight all the more the importance of strategic language, content being highly determined.

In most classroom exercises, however, the ‘goal’ is to arrive at a right answer, which is often pre-determined. Therefore, in hindsight it should not have surprised me to see that the students interpreted the goal of this task as being both fixed and familiar, i.e., create a conversation in English in which a decision about the trip is reached. I did not bother to help them see the possibilities inherent in the task for exploration and experimentation with English pragmatics. Instead, I presented the task as I might have to a group of professional colleagues, at a much-too-expert level for first-year students, and assumed that they would successfully infer the interactive and strategic complexity of the task by generalizing from the necklace example, as I did. In the end, they—naturally enough—drew upon their powerful, existing schemas for ‘good school activity’ to reshape the task to fit their own goals.

The pairs were given 25 minutes to prepare and practice their exchange. As stated above, I asked them to practice having the conversation itself, rather than talk about the task or the situation. Each pair then performed for the class, the audience members marking each solution as either compromise or transcending. In the event, such evaluation was basically impossible, as most of the ‘solutions’ were neither. In general, most pairs fulfilled the instructions to the letter: after engaging in a brief English conversation, they announced a decision to go to one of the two suggested destinations. The loser was

usually offered a second trip next year. Here is a typical conversation from the class in schematic form (the exchanges were not recorded word-for-word; I noted down the strategic moves of each speaker):

SAMPLE CONVERSATION 1:

Speaker H: Let's go to Hokkaido.

Speaker O: Oh, why?

H: [gives reasons: foods, snow, beautiful, cool weather]

O: No, I don't like those things; let's go to Okinawa.

H: Why?

O: [gives reasons: interesting food, beautiful sea, good water sports]

(Both speakers think)

H: Oh, I have a good idea! Let's go to Hokkaido this year; next year we can go to Okinawa.

O: Good idea!

Note the complete absence of any pragmatic features beyond simple disagreement and simple agreement; strategic engagement with the task, with each other, or with the language, is nowhere to be seen. Instead, this pair, along with several others, chose a 'solution' essentially unconnected to either the original conflict or to any circumstances arising from a thoughtful discussion. Instead they relied upon an arbitrary decision in one person's favor. Adding the embellishment of a second trip, or, as one group did, dividing a single trip between two destinations does not make the solution any better motivated or coherent.

Most of the groups displayed this conflict-free style of argumentation. More interesting, but still pragmatically impoverished, were the groups who at least approached the idea of resolution as a discursive process:

SAMPLE CONVERSATION 2:

Speaker O: Let's go to Okinawa.

Speaker H: Why?

O: [gives reasons]

H: I've already been there. I'd like to go to Hokkaido.

O: Why?

H: [gives reasons]

O: Oh, I have a good idea! Let's go to an exhibition of products from Hokkaido and Okinawa. The local Department Store is having an exhibition right now!

H: Good idea! Let's go!

This conversation is more original, and at least gives a nod to the idea of resolving the conflict as opposed to erasing it. Still, it was hard to mark the 'solution' as either compromise or transcending: were they scrapping the trip? Or using the exhibition to help them decide? Or going to fulfill the loser's need to eat regional delicious foods before heading off to the winner's choice of destination? I ended up marking it as transcending, but more for its difference from the other conversations than for any sense of the students have actually fulfilled the instructions *as I had meant them*.



Most interesting of all were the few conversations in which the speakers actually externalized to any degree the reasoning behind the ultimate solution. One pair, using purely geographical reasoning, decided that Disneyland was an acceptable alternative; I asked myself—is this an unexamined compromise or a glittering transcendence of the problem? I'm still not sure.

SAMPLE CONVERSATION 3:

Speaker O: I want to go to Okinawa.

Speaker H: Why?

O: [gives reasons: scuba diving, beautiful ocean, nice weather.]

H: [ditto ditto for Hokkaido]

O: Well, why don't we go somewhere in the middle? Tokyo, or something? I've always wanted to go to Disneyland.

H: Disneyland! Yes! It's a good idea!

O: Okay, we'll take a graduation trip to Disneyland.

In only two exchanges did the speakers seem to share my understanding of the task as a chance to display conflict resolution in action; in conversations 4 and 5, the speakers let the audience follow the broad outlines of their reasoning.

SAMPLE CONVERSATION 4:

Speaker H: Let's go to Hokkaido. [gives reasons: sight-seeing, skiing, cool weather]

Speaker O: No, let's go to Okinawa. [gives reasons: swimming, warm weather, sightseeing, food]

H: Why don't we go somewhere in the middle? It will be cheaper.

O: Yes! You want to ski, maybe we could go to Niigata or Nagano.

H: Yes, and you can do nice sight-seeing in Nagano.

O: Yes, let's go to Nagano.

SAMPLE CONVERSATION 5:

Speaker O: Let's go to Okinawa. I want to go scuba-diving.

Speaker H: Hmm. I'd like to go to Hokkaido.

O: But I want to eat delicious fish.

H: They have good fish in Hokkaido. And there is a lot of water there too. Maybe you can go diving there.

O: It's a good idea!

Leaving aside the implausibility of scuba-diving in the arctic waters of Hokkaido being the same pleasant experience as it would be in tropical Okinawa, at least in this exchange Speaker H refers to the discourse set up in the conversation by pointing out some equivalence in the reasons for each destination. Conversations 4 and 5 are the only moments in this RP lesson when the students' performance suggests, however incompletely, that they somehow share at least to some extent the instructor's goal for the lesson.

### **Adding Rehearsal to Role-Play**

As Bartley cautions, RP works best when sufficient time is devoted to its realization (2002). Rushed, incomplete or insufficiently-prepared performances of RP tasks fulfill few

of the expectations we teachers invest in them. The lesson described above certainly suffered, at a psycholinguistic level if not a social level, from the instructor's failure to invest enough time in orienting the students to the purposes of the exercise. In hindsight, it is easy to see that I should have helped the students exploit the 25-minute preparation time by getting them to engage with it more appropriately.

A long-established tradition in performing arts, one that has received some but not extensive psycholinguistic study, is the concept of rehearsal. Rehearsal is, by definition, time given to performers to explore the options of the text (Verity, 1992, explores in detail, from a Vygotskian perspective, the internal structure of the rehearsal in its orienting, as well as developmental, functions). One of the most important functions of a rehearsal period is its orienting function: it is during this period that the performance arises from the growing, shared collective understanding of what the play (the 'task') means. Not until all the performers are able to see the play from the collective viewpoint, at least in rough form, can they begin to define their own tasks in the arena of the rehearsal-as-activity-setting. Is there a way of adding rehearsal time to standard RP exercises without turning them into play-production exercises?

Because RP is typically used as a supplemental activity rather than the core activity in such programs, it is difficult to imagine how to set up a RP task that does not place unrealistic demands upon an already-crowded schedule. However, a useful approach to a solution exists in the form of a modified RP style created along Vygotskian lines several years ago. In the 1980s, an outline of a scenario-based approach to language teaching, called Strategic Interaction (SI) was published (Di Pietro 1987). Although innovative in many respects, especially in its focus on the strategic use of language for accomplishing agendas over a simplistic linguistic focus, perhaps the most transformative aspect of the approach is his incorporation of a rehearsal phase into the canonical lesson. Briefly, using a role-play exercise as Di Pietro envisions it means affording students a fully-realized collaborative rehearsal period during which groups can not only amass useful linguistic expressions and outline their strategic approach to solving the given conflict, but each member of the group can benefit from the group activity to gain a more useful orientation towards the role-play task itself.

For readers unfamiliar with the basic structure of the SI lesson, a schematic description of how the lesson described above might be presented follows. The canonical SI lesson has three phases, the collaborative, group-based 'rehearsal' phase; the interactive 'performance' phase; and the teacher-led 'debriefing' phase.

## **REHEARSAL**

1. The class is divided into small working groups of 4-5 students each.

2. Each group is given *one* of the roles to prepare, either the pro-O or the pro-H role. The role card gives only a basic instruction: "Prepare to persuade your friend that going to [O] (or [H]) would make a great graduation trip." (Some SI teachers never use such bare-bones roles, and always add a potentially complicating factor, such as 'Your father comes from Okinawa, and therefore he will pay for the whole trip if you and your friend decide to go to Okinawa.')
3. The groups do not know who the other role in the sketch will be, or what her own agenda will be, except that she is a friend. Working collaboratively, the members of each group prepare possibly useful language structures and strategic moves that might help them accomplish their goal. The groups do not interact, so each role-group must try to predict possible arguments and obstacles that might arise, a job made harder because they do not know what the other speaker's goal is.

### **PERFORMANCE**

4. The focus of SI is collaborative preparation and collaborative performance. Therefore, though each role-group chooses a single performer to represent the role during the performance phase, the performer is allowed to consult with her group at any time for linguistic or strategic help. Thus, if the other speaker throws out an unexpected conversation move, the speaker is not left entirely to her own, possibly insufficient devices, but has the 'social cognition' of the group to fall back upon.
5. Since there are two or three groups preparing each of the pro-O and pro-H roles, the sketch is performed several times, with performers from various groups. Since the focus in the final stage of the lesson is on unpacking the language and strategies of the group, the 'surprise' factor of learning that the other person has an equally strong desire to go to a different destination becomes secondary. Students begin to realize that language, especially discussion, dialogue, compromise and problem-solving language, is complex and unpredictable.

### **DEBRIEFING**

6. After each performance, the class is 'debriefed' on the content and structure of the conversation they have just watched; the linguistic choices, including important errors, are gone over, and, especially in a persuasive exercise such as

this, a good deal of attention is focused on the strategic moves of each speaker: how did she try to shape the discussion to reach her goal or seek a new, shared, unpredictable, transcending solution to this interpersonal dilemma?

The SI method infuses role-play with a degree of spontaneity and unpredictability that is otherwise difficult to incorporate into a classroom exercise. Doing an SI scenario usually makes it clear that the 'tidy' solution is not the best one; by emphasizing the pragmatic demands of the task (through the separation of the roles and the retention of secret agendas), SI helps the teacher orient learners towards fulfilling the task in interesting ways. The very structure of the RP, in that the speaker does not know exactly what the other role-player wants, encourages even reticent or low-level students to step off the pre-determined track of simple and unexamined agreement, especially since the supportive rehearsal group can always toss a suggestion into the performance arena.

This approach to creating and performing role-plays is the only one I am aware of that recognizes the importance of orientation and task definition for learners who are trying to cope with the linguistic, pragmatic, cross-cultural and personal demands needed to simulate an 'ordinary' conversation. Exploring the utility of Strategic Interaction for the content-based curriculum referred to above is beyond the scope of this discussion, but it is useful to remember that there are existing ways of bolstering the psycholinguistic engagement of even our apparently most engaged students.

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