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The impact of task performance scoring and tracking on second language engagement

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 January 2017

Received in revised form 8 July 2017

Accepted 13 July 2017

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Performance

Goals

Feedback

Tracking

Tasks

Discussions

Motivation

Engagement

Affective disposition

ABSTRACT

Task performance rubrics and individualized feedback on performance are methods for instructors to support classroom language learning. However, research on the measurable impact of Performance Scoring and Tracking (PST) by learners on quantifiable aspects of their engagement in L2 use across task performances is sparse. In addition, engagement is commonly assessed using learners' subjective responses to questionnaires and post-performance interviews, rather than detailed observational data. An eight-week study involving 88 low-level Japanese university learners examined the effects of PST on engagement in L2 use across discussion tasks. A card scoring system and electronic diary were used for learners to identify and track their own improvements in task performance. Learners were encouraged to engage more in discussions by tracking individual improvements in performance scores across time. Interestingly, the PST did not significantly affect aspects of learner self-reported disposition towards L2 discussions, but did significantly increase and maintain several aspects of engagement in L2 use across task-time and from task-to-task. The potential implications for classroom L2 task implementation are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Task design and implementation has become an important focus in the field of language teaching (Ellis, 2003; Long, 2015; Skehan, 2014). However, learners can sometimes exhibit unexpected reactions towards tasks, including a lack of participation or ill feelings towards taking part (Carless, 2002, 2007). Such non-participation can cause problems for curriculum goals, with little or no work being undertaken by learners at different points in time. By focusing upon task implementation factors which can enhance motivation (MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1998) instructors can potentially increase and maintain learner engagement across time. A higher level of engagement among students is considered desirable, as it is believed to lead to more positive affect towards, interest in and valuing of tasks undertaken (Oga-Baldwin & Nakata, 2017; Reeve & Lee, 2014).

Motivation refers to forces that energize and direct a certain behavior (Reeve, 2009), while engagement is the extent to which a learner becomes actively involved in learning due to factors such as their motivation to do so (Wellborn, 1991). Hence, motivation acts as the driving force for resultant engagement and actual behavior during tasks. This motivation is a combination of both trait motivators brought to the classroom by learners (such as personal and socio-cultural beliefs about the value of learning undertaken), as well as state motivators (such as motivating effects of the task) (Tremblay, Goldberg, & Gardner, 1995). The engagement this motivation creates can be loosely categorized under four types. They are *behavioral*

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2017.07.002>

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Please cite this article in press as: Stroud, R., The impact of task performance scoring and tracking on second language engagement, *System* (2017), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2017.07.002>

(the amount and type of actual participation), *cognitive* (how much mental effort learners are willing to make to complete the task), *social* (how receptive learners are to their interlocutors during performance) and *emotional* engagement (having positive or negative feelings towards the learning and towards others) (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Philp & Duchesne, 2016, p. 51). It is the complex combination of these four types of engagement which can help determine how engaged learners are at a given point in time. Strict separation and analysis of these factors empirically is a likely to be impossible. A more holistic approach to considering measures which represent engagement as a whole (with potential for overlap and correlation between measures) is preferable. A mixed-method approach of collecting data on behavioral, social, cognitive and affective dimensions is required to assess learner engagement at different periods across time.

One approach to improving learner engagement in language classrooms is with the use of task point scoring systems. Performance rubrics, such as discussion card point systems, can clarify expectations for performance and are believed to improve learner participation in tasks (Reese & Wells, 2007). However, quantitative data on the impact of implementing and tracking performance scoring feedback on oral task engagement across time is sparse. Therefore, this paper examines the effects of the implementation of a Performance Scoring and Tracking (PST), a term created for the study in this paper, on engagement in oral L2 use in comparison to learners self-reported affective responses. Learners in the study used a card scoring system, related to spoken contributions during discussions, to score and track their overall performance for tasks across the semester. Effects of the PST on learner engagement are reported and teaching implications are discussed.

1.1. Extrinsic motivation and task engagement

Maehr (1984) describes the investment of effort which a learner will make in classwork as being dependent on factors such as standards of success, learning goals, and a feeling of competence. Thus, learners who understand what factors to focus on in performance, as well as have a clear measure for success, are likely to invest more effort. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) states that all learners (regardless of factors such as age, gender, nationality, or social status) possess the inherent desire and need for personal growth across time with a feeling of autonomy and competence (Reeve, 2012; Reeve, Deci, & Ryan, 2004; Ryan & Deci, 2000). In a recent study by Tanaka (2017), learners reported that having a feeling of autonomy and competence to undertake classroom tasks made them more likely to be motivated and become engaged in their learning.

The use of extrinsic motivators is one potential way to enhance such autonomy and competence for tasks. Extrinsic motivators which focus on specific learning goals are believed to engage learners more in achieving those goals without the need for them to do so consciously (Custers & Aarts, 2005; Parks-Stamm, Oettingen, & Gollwitzer, 2010; Vohs & Baumeister, 2016). Such Goal Priming, as it is known, has been shown to increase affect and behavioral engagement within learning (Bargh, Gollwitzer, Lee-Chai, Barndollar, & Troetschel, 2001; Hart & Albarracín, 2009), as well as increase learner cognitive engagement whilst trying to reach those goals (Custers & Aarts, 2007). SDT states that the use of such extrinsic behavior-directing goals can ultimately lead to more intrinsic motivation among learners for engaging in similar learning in the future without the continual need for the initial extrinsic motivation (Oga-Baldwin & Nakata, 2017; Reeve & Halusic, 2009; Reeve & Lee, 2014).

1.2. PST and task engagement

Learners who are assisted in focusing upon, evaluating and monitoring their own performance before, during and after a task are more likely to understand the purpose of the task and strive to perform better through higher metacognitive awareness (Ellis, 2003, pp. 277–278). Furthermore, Dörnyei (2001, p. 29) states that motivation and resultant engagement in learning requires several process-orientated strategies. He explains that in order to generate motivation you need to increase learner goal-orientedness (focusing them more on achieving specific goals). In addition, to maintain engagement across time learners should focus on such measurable task performance targets and receive continual feedback on them. Therefore, the implementation of a Performance Scoring and Tracking (PST) system, in which learners can assess and monitor their own performance across time, may have a significant impact on engagement.

The use of quantifiable performance rubrics for tasks is one approach to implementing PST. Specific feedback on performance within tasks can increase transparency (Reynolds-Keefer, 2010; Schamber & Mahoney, 2006), reduce anxiety (Panadero, 2011), improve confidence (Andrade, Wang, Du, & Akawi, 2009) and help learners self-regulate learning more (Panadero, Alonso-Tapia, & Huertas, 2012). Moreover, task performance feedback which is specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time-bound (SMART) is the most likely to improve engagement and performance within learning (Moskowitz & Grant, 2009). PST of tasks can potentially meet these needs and, thus, help improve engagement.

Immediate task feedback on individual writing skills (Li, Link, Ma, Yang, & Hegelheimer, 2014) and pronunciation (McCrocklin, 2016) has been shown to help learners become more autonomous and improve their engagement and performance across time. For pair discussion tasks, Reese and Wells (2007) showed how autonomous performance scoring can promote higher levels of learner engagement. In their study, when pairs of learners took cards from piles on their desks, related to the different verbal contributions that they were able to make during unobserved discussions, it was found that they spoke more. However, no detailed observational data was collected in the study to analyze the specific impact of the scoring on engagement in L2 use.

The implementation of performance scoring systems to motivate learners to speak more during tasks is not a revolutionary approach among instructors. However, no study has used a mixed-method approach to examine the specific effects of

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