

ABOUT TIME: PERSPECTIVES ON THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

Cynthia White

Department of Linguistics and Second Language Teaching
Massey University

Introduction

Time is a valuable resource in language learning, and how to make the most of classroom time is a recurrent theme in language teacher education programmes. The teacher has traditionally been seen as the person responsible for skilfully allocating instructional time and for managing the ordering and duration of activities to maximise learning opportunities. To do this well, the teacher needs to be conscious of how much time-on-task there is for students within activities, and also the proportion of that time which requires students to extend their abilities in the target language. This paper outlines different ways of thinking about time in the language classroom, and raises a number of questions including: why has there been a concern with such time-related concepts as pacing and transition time? in what ways has the language teacher been seen as a strategic time manager? how influential is the concept of time-on-task? what is the relationship between particular tasks and student learning time? does time spent on communicative language tasks always contribute to student learning time? The overall aim of the paper is to show how an understanding of different beliefs about time, the teacher, the student and tasks can provide a useful vantage point from which to reflect on classroom practice.

There are two fundamentally different approaches to the study of time in the language classroom as represented in Figure 1 below.

Approach	Time focus	Analysis of ...
The Time Management Approach	Allocated time	Teacher behaviour and classroom dynamics.
	Time-on-task	Interaction patterns and student groupings
The Student Learning Approach	Student learning time	Language tasks and the quality of TL use

Figure 1: Ways of conceptualising time in the language classroom

The first I have called the time management approach, involving an emphasis on the role of the teacher in managing learning, and on classroom dynamics. The other approach, the student learning approach focuses on the extent to which students are engaged with learning tasks and the proportion of such time which is spent extending their competence in the target language. These two approaches can be aligned with the concepts of allocated time, time-on-task and

academic learning time in a type of cline.

The time management approach can be seen as a rational, technical approach to teacher behaviour and classroom dynamics. It includes a concern with *allocated time*, that is the amount of time allowed by the teacher for a particular activity (Richards and Lockhart 1994:171). Moving down the cline away from this approach we can see another conceptualisation of classroom time, namely *time-on-task* which is the degree to which students are engaged in the activity during the time provided (ibid.). Richards and Lockhart also identify what they call *academic learning time*, defined as the extent to which students are successfully engaged; that is the proportion of time-on-task when students are achieving a high degree of accuracy in completing the activity (ibid.). The term academic learning time could be understood to relate only to particular educational contexts, so here instead I will use *student learning time*, which also foregrounds the role of the student in the learning process. This is the core of a student learning approach to time which requires the teacher to think about tasks and the nature of TL use.

The paper is structured as a movement down the cline away from the time management approach towards the student learning approach, as a way of reflecting on how we can make best use of the time available to our classes.

Allocated time

Since the early 1980s a number of studies have been carried out into how language teachers manage time in their classes. The findings from these studies continue to influence current practice, particularly in relation to two time-based concepts: *pacing*, *transition time*. Nunan (1991) reports on a study he carried into the beliefs and judgements of nine ESL teachers, some experienced, some inexperienced. He found that the most frequently expressed concerns of the novice teachers often related to the pacing and timing of lessons. A common criticism of the lessons of inexperienced teachers is that they 'lack pace' meaning there is a lack of momentum or overall direction, activities probably last too long and are not brought to a sense of completion, the attention of students is lost ... There is of course a danger in the other extreme: if activities do not last long enough, students have no sense of involvement or satisfaction. Allocating time appropriately requires judgement and experience, and also requires a consideration of cultural factors. Collier (1979), based on his work with Alaskan students, makes an important distinction between *pace* and *flow* where flow is the interrelatedness of the movements of people who are interacting. He observes that when the teacher's sense of pace is different from that of the students, there is low flow, and this, Holliday (1994) argues, can inhibit learning. Thus, teachers need to be sensitive to the pace, or rate of events in the classroom, which is appropriate to each particular group of students.

A second concept related to allocated time is that of transition time. Transition time is the period between activities in class when students are not dealing directly with the TL, when they are non-engaged, and when, at best, they are waiting for something to happen! In

language classrooms the frequent reorganization of students for different activities means that transition time can be significant. In a study of eight foreign language teachers carried out over a period of two months, Nerenz and Knop (1983) found that transition time accounted for between 8 percent and 20 percent of classroom time. These findings were confirmed in a study carried out by Doyle (1986) who argued that the way teachers manage transitions is linked to the overall effectiveness of the lesson. One way to reduce transition time is to apply the integration principle to the selection and sequencing of language tasks. The integration principle asks the teacher to think about the relationship between tasks and to develop dependencies between tasks such that the students can move through the sequence, with minimal orchestration from the teacher. For further information on the use of integrated sequences see White (1989, 1990).

To sum up this section, the studies by Nerenz and Knop, and Doyle reported here were carried out in the 1980s are exemplars of the time management approach and have resulted in prescriptions for good practice including, for example:

- provide an overview of the lesson
- give clear instructions
- establish smooth and efficient classroom routines
- minimise transition time
- provide supplementary activities for more advanced students.

The focus of such lists is the behaviour of the teacher, and while such behaviours may contribute to good practice, they give us little sense of what use the students may be making of their time. To do this we need to move down the cline in Figure 1 towards the student learning approach, thinking firstly about time-on-task.

Time-on-task

Time-on-task refers to those periods when students are actually engaged with language tasks or with the TL. Finding ways of maximising time-on-task for all students has been seen as a major challenge for the language teacher. Different interaction patterns may increase or decrease the likelihood that a significant proportion of class time will be time-on-task for students.

When we examine the nature of classroom interactions, we can conclude that open-ended teacher questioning is likely to engage more students than, say, closed-ended questioning. However we should think carefully about how we interpret what students do in our classes. It is also possible that some students who are not responding overtly in class are still actively involved in their own learning at that point. Overt behaviour is not a sure guide to the students degree of mental engagement in the lesson. In addition, we cannot be sure that all student talk in pair work represents time-on-task. For example, Franken (1997) monitored three pairs of students carrying out a sequence of communicative activities in preparation for writing, and found variation in the amount of off-task talk (50 percent for one pair, 22 percent for another,

and 8.5 percent for the third pair). Thus, the quantity of student talk does not necessarily represent time-on-task.

The list below summarises some of the typical ways in which students and teachers interact in the classroom.

Teacher talk	The teacher talking, with the class as audience.
Closed-ended Teacher Questioning	Also known as I-R-F, where the teacher initiates a question, gets a response and then provides feedback on that response.
Choral Response	The class responds in chorus, often repeating or responding to a cue.
Open-ended Teacher Questioning	Also known as I-R-R-R-F, where the teacher initiates a question, gets several responses and then provides feedback on those responses.
Full-class Interaction	The teacher is in the background, and the class interacts to discuss an issue, for example.

Figure 2 Examples of classroom interaction patterns

A range of ways of organising students in the classroom (many types of pair work and group work) have been developed in the last twenty years in the belief that such groupings maximise time-on-task for the language student, and provide opportunities for learning (see for example Bejarano 1987, Long and Porter 1985). Does time-on-task automatically equate with student learning time? We can begin to do think about this question by considering the relationship between student learning time and communicative tasks.

Student learning time and communicative tasks

Communicative language tasks involve the student in the negotiation of meaning. For language teachers, one of the attractions of communicative language tasks has been that they maximise time-on-task for language students, who practise using the language through interacting with their teacher and peers. Class activities are usually characterised by activities where there is an information gap, and students exchange information using, in theory, appropriate linguistic forms. The students may receive feedback about their communication such that they may need to negotiate the meaning of the message by paraphrasing, restating or other means. More recently questions have been raised as to how much communicative tasks which have a focus only on the negotiation of meaning can contribute to student learning time (see, for example, Leeman, Arteagoitia, Fridman and Doughty 1995).

Pica (1996) in an article entitled 'Do second language learners need negotiation?' argues that students can complete many communication tasks without improving their accuracy or use of TL forms. She states:

Since the emphasis in communication tasks is on the exchange of message meaning, and most communication tasks do not require structural precision for their execution, such tasks seldom require interlocutors to call attention to, or to correct learners' grammar inaccuracies, or to compare the L2 input with their interlanguage output. (Pica, 1996:15)

This is a complaint many of us have often heard (and tried to counter) from language students: that they can complete communicative tasks successfully but get no feedback on their use of the TL. In addition they claim that completing a communicative task with other non-native speakers is significantly easier than with native speakers. What does this tell us? Is it the case that in many communicative tasks students do not feel extended in their use of the TL, that they are not required to pay attention to the forms they are using, and that they may be working with less demanding aspects of the TL (sounds, structural complexity, vocabulary) than they are capable of? One of the conclusions from Pica's study is the need for a range of tasks which focus the student's attention on particular TL forms.

When we are concerned about student learning time we also need to think about what students learn from teacher-student interactions. That is, the nature of teacher talk is important here. Nobuyoshi and Ellis (1993) reported on a study of the interactions between a teacher and students when carrying out a two-way information gap task. They found evidence to suggest that the students who were pushed to be more comprehensible by the teacher, retained their formal accuracy in subsequent tasks. Undoubtedly more research will appear in this area with, let us hope, further guidelines for how the teacher can contribute through interactions to student learning time.

How then we do make the most of the time available in our classes? A number of responses to this question have been referred to in the previous discussion - reduce transition time, think about student groupings and their relationship to time on task, examine the nature of language tasks, and so on. Each answer we provide also requires us to think about not only the amount of classroom interaction, but the nature of those interactions, and about both the quality and quantity of language use.

Conclusion

The different conceptions of time outlined here are a useful vantage point from which to examine what happens in the language classroom. We can consider the degree to which we as teachers are concerned with our role in managing the lesson (allocated time), or with keeping students on task (time-on-task), or with attempting to maximise student learning time.

It is useful to reflect on the following questions to see how you use time in your classes:

- What kinds of activities do you use most often in your teaching?
- What kinds of interaction patterns are used for those activities?
- How much time-on-task is there for students in each activity?

- What is the potential for student learning time in each activity?
- How can you maximize student learning time in the tasks you use?

The last two questions are of course the most difficult to answer, particularly with any certainty, but they offer great potential for getting us to reflect on how we can assist students in the process of incorporating new knowledge and accurate language use into their system of language.

References

- Bejarano, Y. (1987). A co-operative small-group methodology in the language classroom. *TESOL Quarterly*, 21, 483-501.
- Collier, M. (1979). *A film study in classrooms in western Alaska*. Fairbanks: Centre for Cross-Cultural Studies: University of Alaska.
- Doyle, W. (1986). Classroom organisation and management. In M.C. Wittrock (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching* (pp. 392-431). New York: Macmillan.
- Franken, M. (1997). Quantifying effective talk for writing. Talk given at Massey University English Language Centre, June 6, 1997.
- Holliday, A. (1994). *Appropriate methodology and social context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Leeman, J., Arteagoitia, I., Fridman, B. and Doughty, C. (1995). Integrating attention to form with meaning: focus on form in content-based Spanish instruction. In D. Schmidt (Ed.), *Attention and awareness in foreign language learning* (pp. 217-258). Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press.
- Long, M.H. and Porter, P.A. (1985). Group work, interlanguage talk and second language acquisition. *TESOL Quarterly* 19, 207-228.
- Nerenz, A.G. and Knop, C.K. (1983). Helping student teachers maximize class time in the second-language classroom. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 39, 840-846.
- Nobuyoshi, J. and Ellis, R. (1993). Focused communication tasks. *ELT Journal*, 47, 203-210.
- Nunan, D. (1991). *Language teachers' thoughts, judgements and decisions*. Plenary paper presented at International Conference on Second Language Teacher Education, City Polytechnic of Hong Kong, April 1991.
- Pica, T. (1996). Do second language learners need negotiation? *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 34, 1-21.
- Richards, J.C. and Lockhart, C. (1994). *Reflective teaching in second language classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- White, C.J. (1989). Negotiating communicative language teaching in a traditional setting. *ELT Journal*, 43, 213-221.
- White, C.J. (1990). Integrated sequences in language learning. *System*, 18, 239-244.