

Learners' L1 Use in a Task-based Classroom: Learning Chinese as a Foreign Language from a Sociocultural Perspective

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Abstract—In the past two decades, strong theoretical and pedagogical arguments have been made advocating for task-based activities in the language-learning context. However, many teachers have been reluctant to incorporate task-based activities into their teaching practices due to concerns about learners' extensive L1 use and off-task talk. Informed by sociocultural theory, this study explored the extent to which L1s and their functions were used when performing tasks. The subjects were beginner-level lower-secondary school learners of Chinese. The data shows that learners have a high amount of L1 use, but with only a very small amount occurring for off-task talk across tasks. L1 use mainly occurred in learners' efforts to mediate completion of the tasks. The findings highlight the role of L1 in foreign language learning and suggest that L1 use is associated with a number of factors, such as task types, learners' proficiency, and learning context. Implications for language teachers and task designers are also discussed.

Index Terms—L1 use, task-based activities, Chinese as a foreign language, classroom context

I. INTRODUCTION

For both theoretical and pedagogical reasons, task-based activities have attracted much attention among language researchers and teachers. The assumptions underlying research have been mainly based on interactionist theory. This theory argues that task completion provides learners with opportunities to experience the target language through interactional adjustments such as negotiation meaning, feedback and modified output. These adjustments are central to language acquisition (Pica, 1994; Long, 1996; Mackey & Goo, 2007). Research in this line has mainly focused on examining how the occurrence and amount of these interactions is affected by tasks activities such as task type and task implementation (Gass & Varonis, 1985; Pica, Kanagy & Falodun, 1993; Adams, 2009). Pedagogically, task-featured activities have been widely used due to their reputation for increasing learners' participation, enhancing learners' confidence, and providing learners with more opportunities to speak L2 (Lopes, 2004; Tinker Sachs, 2007; Bao & Du, forthcoming).

Although theoretical and pedagogical arguments for task-featured activities appear to be very impressive, teachers remain reluctant to use them because research has revealed that learners, especially with lower levels of proficiency in L2, exhibit extensive L1 use and off-task talk while performing tasks (Li, 1998; Seedhouse, 1999; Bruton, 2005; Carless, 2008). The use of L1 seems paradoxical with the pedagogical argument for using tasks to increase L2 practice. Thus, minimizing or discouraging L1 use has been taken for granted as best practice during tasks completion, although some researchers have defended its legitimacy as a useful tool in foreign language acquisition (Cook, 2001; Butzkamm, 2003). However, recent research within the framework of sociocultural theory has provided a new perspective on L1 use, viewing it as a helpful tool in L2 acquisition. Research in this vein has reported that the use of L1 provides cognitive support with which learners analyze the target language, develop a joint understanding, and construct ways to complete tasks (Brooks & Donato, 1994; Swain & Lapkin, 1998; Antón & Dicomilla, 1999). These findings have provided insight with which to reconsider the role of L1 use in foreign language acquisition.

Nonetheless, most research of this type has been conducted in a controlled setting with non-beginner learners. Little is known about beginner learners' L1 use in the classroom context, especially with less commonly taught languages such as Chinese as a foreign language (CFL). One study conducted by Bao and Du (forthcoming) revealed that learners used L1 as one of their interactional strategies to complete the tasks. However, less attention has been paid to examining what exactly L1 functions during task completion by beginner-level learners in a classroom setting. The dearth of research on this area calls for further investigation to be done. The current study thus seeks to explore the following research questions:

- 1) To what extent is L1 used while beginner learners perform tasks?
- 2) How does the use of L1 function during task completion?

This study took place in a beginner-level CFL class in a lower secondary school. Video-recording was used to capture the process when learners performed tasks. Informed by sociocultural theory, the functions of the learners' L1 use during task completion was analyzed. The results of the current study are expected to enrich the implication of theoretical principles for classroom context and encourage CFL teachers to reconsider the use of tasks and learners' L1 in order to implement effective ways to improve classroom practice. In what follows, the basic principles of sociocultural theory and research on L1 use within this framework are briefly reviewed, after which a description of the current study is presented. Finally, the findings of this study are discussed.

II. SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY

The sociocultural theory applied here is heavily influenced by the work of Vygotsky (1981), who argues that the development of higher forms of human mental function is mediated. The mediation can be accomplished through using physical materials, interacting with others and using symbolic signs, with language being the most powerful sign (Vygotsky, 1978). Linguistic mediation (i.e., speaking) can occur externally, as verbal mediation when individuals interact with others (Lantolf, 2000), or internally, as private speech when an individual externalizes mental activity by speaking out loud to oneself. Through linguistic mediation, individuals obtain increasing conscious control over mental activity such as planning and problem-solving; over time, this control will lead individual to become self-regulated, one of the major features of higher forms of human mental function (Vygotsky, 1986).

Implicit in this view of foreign language acquisition is the suggestion that language itself becomes not only the learning object but also a mediated means to achieve this object. In other words, language use simultaneously constitutes the specific contents of communication and constructs the ways in which we control ourselves, coordinate our own actions or the actions of others, and regulate our consciousness to facilitate the communication (Brooks, Donato & McGlone, 1997). Through speaking, we mediate our reasoning process, alter our ways of thinking, and develop a mutual understanding of the communicated information in order for us to act and solve problems. Brooks et al. (1997) have indicated, "[as] speaking assists us in the real world to perform complicated tasks, speaking in the foreign language class supports the language learners in achieving control of the new language and the classroom pair-work task itself" (p.526). Thus, speaking comes to serve as both a communicative tool to accomplish social interaction and as a cognitive tool to manage our mental activity in regulating this interactional process. This viewpoint provides a new lens for examining the role of learners' L1 use in second/foreign language learning.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *Sociocultural Perspective of Speaking as a Cognitive Tool*

Recent research in the sociocultural perspective has explored the ways in which speaking is used as a cognitive tool in the language learning process. For example, Brooks and Donato (1994) examined the dialogue of secondary-level English-speaking learners of Spanish during a two-way information gap activity. The researchers found that learners' talk in L1 enabled them to initiate and sustain verbal discourse, establish a shared understanding, and construct a joint goal of the given tasks. They claimed that these talks mediated the learners' control of the emergent language and the procedure of tasks, and finally facilitated the learners' skills to improve as a result, although these L1 talk seemed irrelevant at first glance.

To gain an in-depth understanding of learners' talk during pair-work activity, Brooks et al. (1997) further examined the functional role of speaking in maintaining learners' participation during five similar jigsaw tasks performed by intermediate English-speaking learners of Spanish. The researchers reported that learners' discourse functioned as metacognitive talk (i.e., talk about the task) and metatalk (i.e., talk about talk) that increased their involvement in task completion. These functions enabled learners to comment on their on-going talk, reflect on their on-going activities, externalize emotional reactions to the tasks, and eventually develop control over their communication. Similar functions of speaking during task completion are also reported by Swain and Lapkin (1998), Guerrero and Villamil (2000), and Alley (2005).

The focus of the aforementioned studies was not typically on learners' L1 use, but these studies all pointed out the role of L1 use in developing learners' understandings of, and mediating their interaction in, the target language. As Brooks and Donato (1994) observed, L1 use is "a normal psycholinguistic process that facilitates L2 production and allows the learners both to initiate and sustain verbal interaction with one another" (p. 268).

B. *The Use of L1 In Second/Foreign Language Acquisition*

The role of L1 use in L2 learning has mainly been investigated from a perspective of language transfer or cross-linguistic influence (Ringbom, 1987). Recently, researchers have started to pay attention to the role of L1 use in learner-learner interaction during tasks (Brooks & Donato, 1994; Villamil & Guerrero, 1996; Brooks et al., 1997). For instance, Antón and Dicañilla (1999) explored the use of L1 in collaborative writing tasks carried out by adult English-speaking learners of Spanish as a foreign language. They found L1 use functioned as a critical psychological tool to provide learners with scaffolded help, establish and maintain intersubjectivity (Rommetveit, 1985), and externalize learners' inner speech in cognitively-demanding tasks. They concluded that these functions of L1 use were beneficial for lan-

guage learning since they enabled learners to construct collaborative talk that led them to successfully complete the tasks.

Alger *á* le la Colina and Garc *á* Mayo (2009) reported the use of L1 and its functions in the oral interaction of undergraduate EFL learners with low proficiency in the target language working in pairs while engaged in three collaborative tasks. Their data demonstrated that learners used L1 for two main purposes: metacognitive talk and metatalk. Moreover, the data revealed a very small amount of off-task talk in L1, which was ascribed to the participants being university students, as compared to the relatively more common L1 use by high school or grade 8 students reported by Swain & Lapkin (2000) and Alley (2005). Alger *á* le la Colina and Garc *á* Mayo concluded that, for low proficiency learners, L1 use enabled learners to discuss linguistic items and manage the tasks in a more direct and efficient way, and to transfer their metacognitive and social skills to the L2. The researchers further suggested that it would be desirable to provide learners with expressions or interjections in L2 that related to their mental efforts in L1 in order to allow them to have more casual interactions in the L2.

The research on L1 use has been primarily conducted in a foreign language context. Nonetheless, in an ESL context, Storch and Wigglesworth (2003) conducted a study exploring whether learners used their not-shared L1s as a mediating tool when performing a text reconstruction task and a short joint composition task. In this study, the researchers found a low amount of L1 use by learners, which was ascribed to the highly demanding academic context in which the learners were engaged in using L2. Through the interview, however, researchers found that the learners still perceived L1 use as a helpful tool. Participants claimed that L1 use allowed them to discuss the prompts and the structure of compositions in more depth, and thus to complete the tasks more easily. Some use of L1 even provided participants with unknown words more directly and effectively, and assisted learners in working at a higher level than could be achieved with the restrictive use of L2. The findings of this study reiterate the benefits of L1 use reported in a foreign language context (Alger *á* le la Colina & Garc *á* Mayo, 2009) and suggest further investigation on L1 use is greatly needed.

The use of L1 is widely discussed in immersion programs as well. Swain and Lapkin (2000), for example, examined L1 use by grade 8 French immersion students working in pairs on a dictogloss task and a jigsaw task. The researchers identified three functions of L1 use. First, learners used L1 to develop a joint understanding of the prompt and the instructions in the tasks, and to negotiate their collaboration throughout the tasks. L1 was also used to draw the learners' attention to vocabulary and forms emerging during task completion. Finally, L1 use built an interpersonal interaction between learners. Swain and Lapkin suggest that the appropriate use of L1 could promote L2 learning. Similarly, Behan and Turnbull (1997) examined L1 use by grade 7 French immersion students, concluding that "L1 use can both support and enhance L2 development, functioning simultaneously as an effective tool for dealing with cognitively demanding content" (p. 41). Similar benefits of L1 use are also reported in a Spanish immersion program (Cohen, 1994).

With all of this in mind, from a sociocultural perspective, L1 use has been shown to be a cognitive tool that creates a social space where learners support each other in successfully moving through the assigned tasks. Empirical research has also provided evidence on the benefits of L1 use for second/foreign language learning. However, most research has been conducted in a controlled setting with non-beginner learners. To widen our understanding of L1 use in language learning, the range of research should be extended to different groups of learners from various contexts, with special emphasis on observation in a classroom context. The current study was conducted against this backdrop.

IV. METHOD

A. Context

Influenced by the trend of globalization, learning CFL is becoming increasingly attractive in non-native speaking countries. In Denmark, the number of CFL learners has witnessed a dramatic increase as of late, especially in lower secondary local schools. These schools started CFL as a pilot course with the intention of increasing student interest. The courses were mainly filled by voluntary students from grades 7 or 8 attending in their after-school time, and were delivered by native-Chinese teachers who used English while teaching the class.

With the growing number of CFL learners, teachers encountered difficulty in enhancing learners' participation and increasing their opportunities to speak Chinese in the limited classroom time. In reaction to these challenges, task-focused activities were incorporated into these classes, as tasks are purported to be effective at increasing learners' participation by engaging them in using the target language. Experimental research has documented positive effects of this task implementation in CFL classes (Bao, 2012). However, teachers remain concerned over learners' extensive use of L1 during task completion (Bao & Du, forthcoming) because it seems paradoxical with the argument that task-based activities work to maximize L2 use. This study takes the above concern as its point of departure to investigate learners' L1 use during task completion in one of the CFL classes.

B. Participants

Some of the data from the eight participants was also utilized in an earlier study (Bao & Du, forthcoming). The students were in their second semester of CFL class during the spring semester of 2013. Three students were from grade 8 and the rest from grade 7. They met for ninety minutes once a week in their after-school time over a period of 9 weeks. No students had contact with Chinese-speaking individuals in their daily lives. In other words, they had no opportunity to use Chinese or receive input in Chinese outside of class, meaning they were positioned as beginning learners. As a

voluntary and interest-based class, participants were not required to have any formal assessment, such as an exam, of their learning outcomes.

C. *The Tasks*

Tasks have been defined and conducted differently across the existing literature. Tasks in this study were in line with the definition proposed by Samuda and Bygate (2008), who asserted that tasks should have some real-world connections and promote language use. In other words, tasks were used to engage learners to employ the target language in a communicative context. The researcher, who was also the teacher of the class, designed the tasks based on the contents of the available textbook. The tasks all incorporated form and vocabulary from the textbook and were carried out in pairs or groups. Before task performance, the teacher would explicitly instruct on the targeted form in front of the whole class. Thus, the tasks were used to consolidate learners' understanding and to promote learners' practical use of the target form and vocabulary in interaction with others.

D. *Data Collection*

Data was collected from January to mid-April 2013. During data collection, the teacher had difficulty establishing a fixed group due to participants' erratic attendance. As a result, Two self-selected groups were recorded of which were comprised two or three participants depending on task demands at the moment of data collection. A total of 9 videotapes were collected across the semester.

After viewing the recordings, videos 4, 6, and 7 were selected for this study because they had representatives of each of the task types used across the nine lessons. Tasks 1 and 2 have a restricted structure, using one target form, while Task 3 gives participants unrestricted freedom to select linguistic resources and make their own dialogues in the target language. The description of the three tasks was as follows:

1. Sentence construction task: requiring students to put mixed pieces of words into order according to the given sentences in English.
2. Information-gap task: requiring students to exchange information with each other to complete a given student's school schedule by using the fixed pattern in the target language.
3. Role-play: designing and displaying a conversation between international tourists and a waiter in a Danish restaurant.

E. *Data Analysis*

With the exception of poor quality on one group's recording during the role-play task in video 7, all other recordings from the three tasks were transcribed by a paid Danish assistant and rechecked by the first researcher. For the analysis, we identified L1 use as students spoke in Danish or contained phrases in Danish given our context. We evaluated the extent of L1 use as a percentage of the total turns in tasks. We then segmented L1 turns into episodes, incorporating ranges from one turn to several turns according to L1 function and codes that were simultaneously assigned to these episodes. Through iterative examination, these codes were merged into a category as a final theme. To check for the interrater reliability, the two authors independently coded one transcript for episode and L1 function. The interrater reliability was 84% and 86%, respectively. We solved disagreements through discussion as they occurred.

The coding revealed five roles of L1 played during task completion. Some of the roles were similar to those reported by previous studies (Swain & Lapkin, 2000; Alger á le la Colina & Garc á Mayo, 2009). Categories such as task clarification and task management were adopted from Storch and Wigglesworth (2003) but the specific items under these categories were more extensive in the present study:

1. Task management: organizing the activity, discussing strategies to deal with tasks, monitoring the procedures, re-focusing attention, asking for help, making suggestions.
2. Task clarification: discussing the content of the task, discussing how to carry the task out, clarifying the meaning in task instructions and prompts, analyzing the information in the task.
3. Attention to vocabulary: clarifying unclear vocabularies, searching for the unknown vocabulary, making explanations, translating.
4. Focusing on grammatical forms: explaining grammar, discussing uncertain grammatical structures.
5. Releasing affectivity: saving embarrassment, expressing frustration, giving praise to partners.

In order to gain a fuller understanding of L1 use, off-task talk that was unrelated to the task, such as casual talk, was coded as well. In the findings, each participant's name was replaced by the capital letter representing the first letter extracted from their Chinese surname. 'PP' represents all participants.

V. FINDINGS

The data analysis focused on presenting answers to the research questions: the extent of L1 use and the functions of L1 during task completion.

A. *The Extent of L1 Use*

The first research question inquired to what extent L1 was used while beginner learners performed tasks. The amount of L1 use was calculated by a percentage of the total turns. Table 1 displays the amount of L1 produced by each group across the tasks.

TABLE 1.
THE AMOUNT OF L1 USE ACROSS THREE TASKS

Tasks	L1 turns (%)	Total turns
<i>Sentence construction</i>		
Y-L-S	58%	84
O-J	29%	133
<i>Information-gap</i>		
Y-S	33%	143
O-J	32%	132
<i>Role-play</i>		
O-J-S	86%	120

As shown in table 1, learners generally had a high percentage of L1 use, with the highest percentage of L1 use, approximately 86%, taking place in the role-play task. In the information-gap task, the two pairs produced similar percentages of L1, approximately 32%. In the sentence-construction task, however, there was a remarkable difference between the two groups. One group of three learners produced the smallest amount of total turns but the second highest percentage of L1 use across tasks, approximately 58%. In contrast, another pair group produced the lowest percentage of L1 use across tasks, approximately 29%.

B. The Role of L1 during Task Completion

The second research question inquired as to how the use of L1 functioned during task completion. Qualitative analysis of the data identified five functions for L1 use. Table 2 displays the number of episodes related to each function across tasks. For comparison, the number of off-task episodes was also presented.

TABLE 2.
ROLE OF L1 USE AND THE NUMBER OF CORRESPONDENT EPISODES ACROSS TASKS

Tasks	Task management	Task clarification	Attention to vocabulary	Focusing on grammatical forms	Releasing affectivity	Off-task talk
<i>Sentence construction</i>						
Y-L-S	12	4	6	2	5	1
O-Y	18	3	6	0	2	0
<i>Information-gap</i>						
Y-S	11	2	10	1	3	3
O-Y	7	0	14	0	4	2
<i>Role-play</i>						
O-Y-S	12	9	8	2	0	0
<i>Total episodes</i>	60	18	44	5	14	6
<i>Total percentage</i>	40%	13%	30%	3%	10%	4%

As shown in table 2, L1 use predominantly fell under two functions: task management and attention to vocabulary. Between these two functions, participants most frequently made use of L1 for task management. The following example illustrates how participants managed the tasks by making suggestions and discussing task completion in L1.

Extract 1

L: Hvis det er den sidste, mon ikke det s åbare er dem alle sammen?

If it is the last one, I wonder if it isn't just them all?

Y: Jo, men I hvilken rækkefølge? "Tåmen" er det "deres"?

Yes, but in which order? "Tåmen" is that "theirs"?

S: Ja

yes

The next largest category of L1 use related to vocabulary attention, especially in the information-gap task in which the highest number of L1 episodes occurred. Most of these episodes related to searching for unknown words, while a few included making explanations about the vocabularies as in the extract below.

Extract 2

- S: xīngqī ... ja ja
xīngqī ... yes, yes
- Y: āh nej, xīngqī, xīngqī er sōndag
oh no, xīngqī, xīngqī is Sunday
- S: nej, xīngqī er dag, wǔ er hvorn ā
no, xīngqī is the day, wǔ is when
- Y: xīngqī wǔ er fredag
xīngqī wǔ, that is Friday

While 30% of L1 episodes dealt with vocabulary attention, only 3% across the tasks were related to grammatical issues. Nevertheless, this does not mean that learners produced entirely error-free utterances in the target language during task completion. This will be discussed in the next section.

In addition, 13% of L1 use for task clarification occurred in the role-play task. Participants began a discussion about the instructions of the task and continuously discussed the content of their dialogue throughout the task, as shown in extract 3.

Extract 3

- O: Er det ikke for 6 personer?
Isn't it for six people?
- J: S āer det for os alle sammen
Then it is all of us.
- S: (til den anden gruppe): kan vi ikke bare være sammen alle sammen s ā?
(to the other group): Can't we just all be together then?
- PP: Hvad?
What?
- O: Vi skal selv regne det ud
We have to figure it out ourselves.
- S: Men vi kan ikke være alle de roller selv
But we can't all play those roles.

In terms of releasing affectivity, fourteen L1 episodes were distributed evenly in the sentence construction and information-gap tasks. In these episodes, learners mainly released their frustration when they could not remember or find the appropriate words. However, in a few extracts, learners praised their partners' contributions. Extract 4 provides one example of this.

Extract 4

- S: Nej det er 'lille søster', s ā det er m āmei
No, it is 'younger sister', so it is m āmei
- Y: n āh ja, det er rigtigt – godt arbejde Krelle
Oh yes, that is correct. Good job, buddy

Surprisingly, only 4% of all L1 episodes were related to off-task talk. More interestingly, neither off-task talk nor affectivity releasing occurred in the role-play task.

VI. DISCUSSION

Firstly, the findings provide further evidence of the role of L1 in foreign language acquisition. The data shows that learners have a high amount of L1 use, but mostly for the purpose of mediating task completion. As shown in table 2, L1 was mainly used for task management and vocabulary attention, whereas a smaller amount of L1 was related to task clarification and affectivity expressions. Although L1 use functioned differently, these functions have collectively facilitated learners in clarifying the meaning and content of the task, discussing and organizing its procedures, expressing emotional reactions during the tasks, and establishing a joint understanding to "support and sustain their interaction" (Brooks et al., 1997, p.531). Brooks et al. (1997) referred to this kind of talk as "metacognitive talk", which was almost always conducted in L1 but may disappear as learners progress over time or develop practical expressions in the target language. Importantly, this metacognitive talk in L1 cognitively orients learners to increase control over the language and tasks, and eventually become self-regulated through verbal engagement in this meaning-making process.

L1 use also assisted learners in finding unknown words, clarifying and discussing these words, and explaining and analyzing them. In doing so, learners drew on their linguistic resources, reinforced their understanding of existing knowledge, and identified the gaps between their current language and the target language, all of which are of great value for language acquisition (Mackey & Goo, 2007). From this point of view, our findings shed light on the need for practical teachers to reevaluate learners' performance during tasks and to reconsider how to most productively apply the use of task-based activities in foreign language learning.

Secondly, our findings highlight the influence of task characteristics on L1 use. Unlike the results reported by Storch and Wigglesworth (2003), in which the majority of L1 was used for task clarification, the current study shows that learners demonstrated only 13% of L1 use for task clarification. This difference could be explained by the fact that the tasks used in Storch and Wigglesworth's study, such as the joint composition task, were more complicated than the

tasks performed in the current study. In addition to task complexity, task types also affected the extent of L1 use. As has been shown, the amount of L1 use differed across the three tasks. Learners in the role-play task produced a higher percentage of L1 use than those in the other two tasks. This may derive from the more restricted structure inherent in both the information-gap task and the sentence-construction task, which limited learners to L2 use more frequently than the role play task. Moreover, task types also elicited different kinds of L1 use. As the data shows, the information-gap task produced the highest number of L1 episodes on vocabulary attention, while the role-play task produced the highest L1 use for task clarification. These findings are consistent with the results reported by Alger à le la Colina and Garc à Mayo (2009), which revealed task-related variation in L1 use. These effects provide important insight for task designers when creating tasks for foreign language learners.

Thirdly, our findings suggest that in addition to task characteristics, a variety of other factors influence learners' L1 use. Compared with the lower use of L1 reported by Storch and Wigglesworth (2003), the current study indicates a high amount of L1 use across tasks. This difference could be attributed to the fact that participants in Storch and Wigglesworth's study were intermediate-level university students in a highly demanding academic context while participants in the current study were beginner-level lower-secondary school learners in a voluntary learning context. Furthermore, the data shows that the amount of L1 use varied considerably between the two groups in the sentence construction task: 58% was produced by three learners in one group and 29% produced by another pair group. These findings demonstrate that in addition to task characteristics, there may be other factors associated with learners' L1 use. As Swain and Lapkin (2000) argued, "task may be only a 'blueprint'" (p. 266); how to construct and carry the tasks out will be individually unique and dependent on a number of variables (Coughlan & Duff, 1994).

The researchers of the current study were surprised to find that there was only 4% off-task talk across the tasks. This small percentage of off-task talk was in remarkable contrast to the results reported by Swain and Lapkin (2000) and Alley (2005), which respectively identified 12% and 21% of off-task behavior. Alger à le la Colina and Garc à Mayo (2009) ascribed the difference between percentage of off-task talk in their own data and the higher percentage in Alley (2005) to the different ages of participants (Alger à le la Colina and Garc à Mayo's participants were university students, whereas Alley's study used high school students). It is clear, however, that this explanation cannot be applied to the current study. The participants here were lower-secondary school students, yet they demonstrated only a small percentage of off-task talk. It is clear that further research in this area is greatly needed.

This finding points to the overall complexity of the role of learners' L1 use during task completion. Given the context of this study, variables may include learners' proficiency level in Chinese, learners' ages, learners' attitudes toward Chinese learning, learners' motivation to participate in the CFL class, learners' perception of task activity, and learners' understanding about the intent in using tasks, etc. These variables, operating either independently or together, affect learners' performance during tasks. As Brooks and Donato (1994) stated, "tasks cannot be externally defined or classified on the basis of specific external task features despite our best efforts to do so" (p. 272). Thus, these other variables should be taken into account when designing or implementing tasks in a foreign language classroom.

Finally, this study has implications for language teachers using tasks for foreign language learning. In addition to the variables discussed above, it was striking that the data showed only 3% of L1 use related to grammatical forms across all tasks. It appeared, at first glance, that learners achieved total error-free output in the target language. However, in actuality, there were a number of instances in which learners merely ignored some non-target utterances, as shown in extract 5.

Extract 5 (Jakob is a character in the task)

J: Jakob you sh ànme?

What does Jakob has?

O: Eh, xīngqīSi Jakob yǒu eh dānmàiwén eh tǐyù wén

Oh Thursday Jakob has eh Danish class eh sport class

J: Dānmàiwén og hvad ellers?

Dānmàiwén and what else?

In this extract, O directly answered J's non-target question without any doubt. In contrast, J attended to the unclear word 'tǐyù wén' in O's response by sending a clarification check in the third line. This exchange exemplifies Seedhouse's (1999) argument that when performing tasks, learners might focus on the accomplishment of the task rather than the language used, especially when non-target utterances do not break the communication. This argument provides one potential explanation for the lower number of L1 episodes relating to grammatical issues in the current study. This argument also produces critical insight to the necessity for language teachers to ensure the accuracy of learners' utterances generated during task performance. Language teachers should be aware of the learners' language use and monitor them, training learners to correct each other during tasks or designing more grammar-related tasks in order to develop learners' accuracy in the target language.

Taken together, the findings show that learners have a high amount of L1 use but with good function during tasks. Although the use of L1 might be connected with a number of variables, its position as an instinctive process could make it beneficial for facilitating foreign language learning. Thus, rather than taking L1 use as a failure, as Butzkamm (2003) suggests, the beneficial role of L1 in foreign language learning should be acknowledged and language teachers should work with this instinctive process, putting it to good use rather than avoiding or resisting it.

VII. CONCLUSION

Taking sociocultural theory as a point of departure, this small-scale study explored beginner learners' L1 use when performing tasks in a classroom focusing on Chinese as a foreign language. The data shows that the use of L1 as a cognitive tool facilitates learners in clarifying the content and meaning of the task, establishing a joint goal, effectively moving the task along, and assisting each other in solving difficulties. L1 use also provided learners with cognitive support to retrieve words and assess grammatical forms in the target language. With the help of L1, beginner learners successfully and efficiently accomplished the assigned tasks, which they might not have been able to achieve without using L1. Although the data shows only a small percentage of off-task talk in L1, this study does not intend to encourage L1 instead of L2 use during tasks, rather, we suggest that L1 use should be acknowledged as an instinctive process that can facilitate learners' involvement in verbal interactional processes to accomplish the assignment. Our findings also suggest that the use and function of L1 is influenced by a variety of factors, which should be taken into account by language teachers and task designers in order to implement effective ways of promoting language learning.

This study has obvious limitations: the small sample size of learners and the two tasks' restricted structure in grammar focus and vocabulary practice. Additionally, the learners' perceptions of L1 use deserves further exploration. Therefore, further research should include more participants and different types of tasks. Future researchers should also utilize a wider range of assessment methods, such as observation and interviews, in order to expand our understanding of the role of L1 use in foreign language classrooms.

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