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Issues in Task-based Language Instruction

Neal Jost

Dokkyo University

This paper provides an overview of the some issues related to task-based language teaching at the university level in Japan.

この小論文は日本の大学におけるタスクベース語学指導の問題点を提示している。

With the advent of communicative English language teaching at high schools in Japan, the nature of students entering universities has changed. Now, more than ever before, first year students entering university are more accustomed to communicative language instruction, have a better grasp of the target language and culture, and understand that English is a tool for communication, not just an academic subject. All this suggests that the nature of English language instruction at the university level must better aim to suit the needs of these students, and task-based language instruction seems to hold some promise in that regard. The aim of this short paper is to address some of the issues that must be considered in the use of tasks in the communicative classroom at the university level:

1. How we:
   (a) define tasks
   (b) design tasks, based on student needs and the constraints of the teaching context
   (c) plan and carry out tasks
   (d) evaluate tasks for efficacy (does the task promote learning and interest in the target language?)
2. Some common task types.

This paper concludes by looking at a particular task that has yielded positive results, in that students became motivated and self-directed in their language acquisition processes, and also in that they were able to gain understanding and skill in a pragmatic language function uncommon to the L1 culture.

Definition of "task"

According to Crookes (1986), there is little agreement on the definition of *task* in either the research, or in language pedagogy. Furthermore, definitions range from the most general, as in Long (1985) "Tasks are the things people will tell you they do if you ask them and they are not applied linguists" (p.156), to the more specific and more recent, as in Bygate, Skehan, and Swain (2001), "A task is an activity

which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective" (p. 213). Ellis (2003) holds that a task is a working plan, and that any definition should include the following: "the scope of the task; the perspective from which a task is viewed; the authenticity of a task; the linguistic skills required to perform a task; the psychological processes involved in task performance; and the outcome of a task "(p.2).

Definitions of a task vary, and no one single definition can work in all teaching contexts, nor provide an overall linguistic paradigm for second language instruction. Thus, language instructors will have to define *task* according to their teaching context, based on their own theories of language acquisition/ instruction. Whether they hold that tasks that focus on meaning are more appropriate, or whether they hold that tasks that focus on form are more appropriate, depends on the teaching context, and on the needs of the students.

Designing tasks based on student needs and constraints of the teaching context

The most difficult aspect of designing a task for university students is knowing what kind of tasks will best suit their needs, and knowing how a task will fit into the constraints of the teaching context. The aim of communicative language instruction at the high school level is to foster a basic competence in communicative English. Even though many institutions may achieve this goal, it does not follow that all students graduating from high school will have the same level of competence, nor does it follow that the university classroom setting, as is, will be the most conducive for certain types of tasks. Thus, when designing a task, the instructor will have to consider many issues. The following list of questions serves as guide to help assist in designing a task:

- What are the linguistic needs of the students?
- What common goals do the students share for language learning?
- What are your overall linguistic goals for the class you set for the class?
- Will the task help you meet those goals?
- Will the task create the optimal environment for learning?
- Will the nature of the task be constrained by class size?
- Will the classroom be able to accommodate the task logistically?
- Will the task work for mixed majors, or different language levels?
- Will the task be completed in one class period, or will more time be needed?
- Will the task engage students equally?
- Will the task meet the objectives set by the department?
- Will the task be specific, or general, in nature?
- Will the task focus on input rather than output?
- Will the task focus on meaning, or form?
- Will the task ultimately provide motivation for the students?

While these questions provide a general guide for designing tasks, they may not be applicable to every teaching context. Clearly, the instructor will have make important decisions based on her teaching context.

Planning and carrying out a task

The success of a task is very much contingent on good planning. It is not uncommon for students who possess the linguistic competence to complete a task to fail to accomplish the goals the instructor may have in mind, simply because they were unable to follow the overall purpose, or goal, of the

task. To ensure success, the instructor needs to have (1) an overall plan, (2) goals set for each stage of the task, (3) a clear timeframe for each and every stage of the task, and (4) a plan for evaluation, or summary of the effectiveness. of the task. Willis (1996) has detailed the main components of a *task cycle*, and places specific emphasis on the planning stage. Through detailed planning, the learners will more likely attain the overall goals set for the task.

How we evaluate task efficacy

The type of task will dictate how to evaluate student performance. It will also indicate the efficacy of a task. Tasks that focus on specific features of the target language, that is, *closed tasks*, by definition require learners to reach a specific or exact solution. The evaluation process is self-evident, and the results will lend evidence to how a task works for the goals set for the course. On the other hand, the evaluation of tasks that are more communicative in nature, that is, *open tasks*, is more subjective. Here, greater consideration must be afforded (1) student performance or interaction, (2) student ability to follow the task design, (3) level of student enthusiasm, and (4) student self-and task evaluation. Clearly, the evaluation of an open task is more problematic, but perhaps the need for specific evaluation is less important with this kind of task.

Common tasks in language instruction

Type of Task	Examples	Details
Listing	Brainstorming, fact finding	A party list, memory challenge, qualities for a job
Ordering and sorting	Sequencing, ranking	Jigsaw activities, best way to do something
Comparing	Finding similarities, finding differences	Listening to T.V. programs, spotting differences between pictures
Problem solving	Giving advice, planning	Responding to an advice column, planning a dinner
Discovery	Finding something new	Learning about the Pyramids
Debating	Debating how to protect something	How best to save the earth

Example of a task

If we keep in mind that the definition of a task is not as restrictive as one may think, the kinds of tasks an instructor can create are limitless. Furthermore, tasks can serve as the backbone of a course, as in strict task-based instructing (see Prabhu, 1987), or they can serve to complement a syllabus.

The task presented here was designed to support a general communicative English course for 1st year university students, with the main focus of the course being on spoken fluency. The task itself was designed to help students develop skill in critical evaluation. The definition of *task* paralleled Bygate, Skehan, and Swain's (2001) more general definition focusing on meaning. The task emphasized interaction, and one pragmatic aspect of the language: constructive criticism. It did not focus on any particular feature of the target language.

The goal of the task was for each student to provide a critical evaluation (constructive criticism) of fellow student's posters. This task was the concluding activity for student-generated poster sessions held in the previous session. This task required 45 minutes.

Pre-task activity

Effective critical evaluation is based on mutual respect and a common desire to improve something. The pre-task activity set out to ensure that learners understood some of the basic tenets of critical evaluation. Specifically, it showed (1) the importance of critical evaluation is that the common goal is for a better final product, not to humiliate someone, (2) the techniques for critical evaluation, (3) and some of the language common to criticism. Additionally, the teacher provided a mock criticism of an imaginary student focusing upon, and emphasizing, the target points.

The task

Working in groups of three, constituting the two people who made the poster and one person to conduct the evaluation, students follow the pattern for providing critical evaluation outlined below:

- State several positive things about the poster. Allow for response.
- State several things that you will remember in the long term. Allow for response.
- State one thing that you think would make the poster even better, and why.
- Demonstrate how you think this improvement could be achieved.
- Ask the person who made the poster to offer their thoughts on what has been said.
- Conclude the task with each student in the small group stating something positive about the task.

Finally, all students are required to write their thoughts about critical evaluation on a sheet of paper. The instructor reads a number of them to the whole class.

This task set out to help students work on a specific pragmatic function of the target language, and to conclude the poster sessions which were completed in the previous class. The task was evaluated by considering how much interaction occurred in English between students, as well as their written comments.

Conclusion

This general overview of issues related to using tasks for second language instruction has touched upon a few important for both the teacher and student alike. Knowing how a task

should be defined according to the teaching context, designing a task to suit the linguistic needs of the students, providing a clear overview of the task, and knowing how to evaluate a task, are but a few things that need to be considered when using tasks in second language instruction. As communicative language instruction becomes even more common, particularly in the university setting, teachers need to discover how students can further develop their competence in the target language. The continued use of tasks in these settings may offer the teacher an alternative to textbook focused language instruction.

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