Using Tasks for Achieving Meaningful Oral Output

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A task-based approach to oral output activities is one response to the difficulty in achieving meaningful oral output in English language classrooms at Japanese universities. A task is an activity with an open-ended and broad goal. As such, a task invites the learner to achieve meaningful oral output because the goal of the task is not only the use of the English language but also the content of the goal is decided by the learner thereby bridging what is personally meaningful to the learner to language learning. This approach can have several positive implications for the language learner.

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Problems in achieving oral output: The role of the learner

A common problem facing many university language educators at Japanese universities is generating meaningful oral output from learners. In this context, meaningful oral output can generally be understood as language used orally in a spontaneous, personalized and real-life manner. Dadour and Robbins have observed that Japanese learners tend to rely on "passively absorb[ing] information provided by the teachers" and that Japanese learners need to be coaxed into "the value of active involvement" (Dadour et al, 1996). One possible reason for this problem is the role (or lack of) the learner plays in the activities. What follows is a list of three ways to conceptualize how the role of the learner in oral output activities can be problematic.

(1) The learner is challenged beyond her abilities

Oral output can be hindered when activities demand too much of the learner. The role of the learner is expanded beyond her capacity. This can occur when activities are overly broad in scope, provide little direction or demand language skills not yet familiar to the learner. Without being equipped with proper guidance and appropriate language tools, meaningful oral output is left to chance. Indeed, language research points to a relationship between the learner's retention and transfer of learning strategies and how explicitly activity instructions are spelled out for the learner. (Dadour et al, 1996) Furthermore, it can be inferred that the lack of direction and

tools can frustrate the learning process since it leaves the learner overwhelmed and intimidated.

(2) The learner is insufficiently challenged.

Oral output activities can also demand too little of the learner. The role of the learner can become mechanistic. Closed tasks, drills and comparable activities for which there is a singular answer, although instrumental to the language learning process in that they can check for correct understanding and usage of language and guide students into more ambitious ways of expressing ideas by activating passive language or rehearsing language that will be necessary in particular situations, can *by themselves* fail to fully challenge learners insofar as they restrict both the usage of a wide range of language in a way that is spontaneous and as a mode of self expression of the learner.

(3) The learner feels that activities lack personal meaning.

Oral output is made difficult when learners feel that activities are not personally relevant. This observation falls in line with contemporary discourse on the role played by the affect in language learning. (See Arnold et al, 1999) This gulf between the learner and the oral activity can occur when learners are not asked to contribute creative input. By this, I refer to the basic meaning of creative; that is, playing a formative and active role in the making of something. Learners may feel disengaged with activities which do not make use of the learner's creative input such as the learner's imagination, personal experiences, personal interests and unique skills. Without a personal connection, it is difficult for learners to use language in a meaningful way. Why is this creative input relevant? The primary reason is that this creative input is ultimately an expression of the learner's

self and identity. And what could be a more compelling and motivating factor in wanting to engage with an activity? As Moskowitz puts it, "Indeed, the most fascinating subject we can learn about and talk about is ourselves. And we learn about ourselves *through others*." (Moskowitz, 1999)

These problems from the viewpoint of the learner suggest that rather than forcing the learner to accommodate the activity, oral output activities need to be structured such that they suit the learner. A task-based approach to oral output activities can provide this structure. In the following section, I discuss the meaning of a task and why the use of tasks can address the problem of oral output in light of the problems outlined above.

To show why a task-based approach can facilitate meaningful oral output, we need to first consider the question, what is a task? While competing definitions exist (see Nunan, 2004, and Jost, 2003), the basic idea of a task is that it requires the doing of something that is goal-oriented. A task seeks to achieve an objective and thus has a non-linguistic outcome such as making a decision, producing a skit or telling a story. It contains the basic steps to guide the learner in achieving a focused goal without prescribing any one particular outcome. To further elucidate the meaning of a task, we should consider what a task is *not*. A task should be distinguished from a mechanical activity such as a drill in which the outcome is predetermined; in other words, it is not a "pedagogic exercise" (Nunan, 1999). Instead, a task relies on the learner to play a formative role in the completion of the task and in doing so it generates a "real life" or authentic context.

Why use a task-based approach for oral output activities?

Why does a task-based approach lend itself to achieving meaningful oral output in the Japanese language learning environment? The answer to this question is twofold. First, a task, such as telling a story or producing a skit, compels the student to make use of language *in order to* complete the task. Second, a task-based approach can incorporate the learner's needs and interests because (1) it offers a guided framework and the necessary language tools to complete the goal and yet because it is open-ended, i.e. no one answer is prescribed, (2) it compels the learner to assume creative responsibility and in this formative role she can incorporate her own personal preferences. In sum, a task-based approach to oral output activities has a guided goal and yet is flexible enough so that the learner can work independently and contribute creatively.

Having outlined why a task-based approach can facilitate oral output, I will show in the following section one way to implement such an approach to oral output activities by providing a conceptual framework and concrete examples.

Task-based oral output activities: A conceptual framework with examples

One approach to implementing a task-based approach to language learning is given in Figure 1 (note that these steps fulfil the basic requirements of language pedagogy in that they provide language data, information and practice; see Nunan, 2001).

The conceptual framework laid out in Figure 1 shows how an oral output activity can be structured so that the learner is given sufficient guidance and necessary language tools and yet is challenged to contribute to the creative process and also has the opportunity to make use of a variety of language. Steps 1-3 are essentially preparatory. They provide a starting point for the actual task. The example given is a simple news story of fraud. (See Appendix A for two more examples.) Step 4 is the transition stage; it simultaneously hands the responsibility of the task over to the learner while providing assistance to help learners work more independently. In the example, the learners must now interpret the news story about fraud. To do so, they must ensure that they have understood the story which enforces the language learning dimension and they must also play a creative role. Since they are given only general facts from the news story, there is no *one* correct interpretation of the story thus inviting a creative response to the activity. Steps 5 and 6 allow the learner to make use of language more naturally and creatively, and they allow the learner to personalize the activity. Looking to the example, the learner must move away from considering the conversation abstractly. Instead, she and her partner must interpret how the conversation was played out as a real-life event. This allows the usage of language in a more natural way and also the learners must use their creative and acting talents. They can also decide to portray the story of Leo in a serious dramatic light or in a comical manner. The open-ended nature of the activity allows for a variety of responses and the usage of a variety of talents and skills which helps to make the output meaningful to the learners. Step 7 allows the learners to further practice using language in a real-life manner and also see the fruition of her creation and abilities.

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Figure 1. Implementing a task-based approach (Example: A 90-minute lesson*)

Stages	Rationale	Activities
(1) Choose a target task. Choose an oral output task such as a skit, story-telling, a debate, etc.	This provides both the learner and instructor with concrete direction.	Make a short skit which illustrates a story.
(2) Create context. Use a short reading, writing or listening task which serves as a mental foundation.	This equips the learner with a mental context which creates a learning focus and also provides opportunity to introduce new language.	Read a short news report about a case of fraud in which a woman asks a man (Leo) to donate money to help a sick child. The man donates money but it turns out that the woman was a con artist (from *North Star Intermediate*, First Edition, Longman, 1998).
(3) Confirm understanding. Ask students focused questions about the context to ensure comprehension of language and ideas.	This allows the learner to refine the mental image and to practice language use in a controlled way.	Answer general questions to ensure that learners understand the basic idea of the story: *Who was involved? Why did Leo donate money? How did the con artist swindle Leo?*
(4) Create the basis for the target task. Ask the learners to respond creatively to the context with an oral or written sketch/ outline.	This allows the learner to both use passive language and acquire new language. As well, it allows the learner to take control of her learning. It also requires the use of creative input.	Imagine you and your partner were Leo and the con artist. "What was the conversation that took place?" Assist learners by asking prompting questions: *What illness did the child supposedly have? How much money did Leo donate? Did the con artist show a picture of the child?*

(5) Authenticate the task linguistically. Have learners practice the basic target task using their outlines. Encourage use of 'real-life' linguistic details.	This motivates the learner to use and acquire language in a more natural manner.	Read the conversation with your partner using your outline. Add real-life details to your conversation. *For example, instead of 'Can you donate money for a sick child,' make it more realistic. Try 'A child is dying of a terrible disease. She needs your help.'*
(6) Authenticate the task non-linguistically. Have learners practice again but add 'real-life' non-linguistic details i.e. dramatic effects.	This provides the learner with the opportunity to practice.	Act out the conversation with your partner. Add dramatic effects by using appropriate props, rhythm, tone, facial expressions, gestures, sound, etc. *[A sad voice]: [Show photo.] 'A child is dying of a terrible disease. [Look directly at partner.] She needs your help.'*
(7) Perform the task. Have learners perform the task as a 'real-life' situation.	This allows the learner to feel more confident using language in a more natural manner.	Have learners perform the skit in front of a group without the use of a script. *Variation*: Have two students who did not collaborate together to act out the dialogue. Since at this point they are already very familiar with the situation, they can 'spontaneously' perform the story as a skit.

*See Appendix A for further examples.

As well, note the variation provided for the example which further pushes the learners to use language naturally because they must do seemingly without preparation.

Here we have outlined one way to implement the use of tasks for oral output activities for language learning. We hope we have shown that a task-based approach provides learners with (1) sufficient structure and tools and (2) sufficient freedom so that oral output is meaningful to the learners as language learners and as individuals.

Discussion: Benefits of using tasks

So far, we hope we have shown one way in which a task-based approach to oral output activities can be implemented. Here we outline some thoughts and comments about the benefits of such an approach based on our observations and experiences**:**

(a) **Learners can develop as language learners** because they must assess their own language needs, make use of passive language and simultaneously acquire new language. Also, they are given the opportunity to participate linguistically in the fruition of those ideas.

(b) **Learners can become better at learning** because he or she must assume a more active and autonomous role in the learning process insofar as a task allows learners, as Nunan observes, "the possibility of planning and monitoring their own learning," (Nunan, 2004) and thus, take more responsibility for their learning process.

(c) **Learners can develop as individuals.** They are given the opportunity to make the activities meaningful by making use of their imagination, intellect, judgment and personal preferences, which allow them to confirm and explore their own identities. As well, they can gain confidence in his or her communicative skills through the opportunity the practice using language in an authentic manner.

There are two further benefits worth noting for the language instructor. First, by using tasks, the instructor becomes a facilitator and can spend more time catering to the particular needs of learners. As well, the instructor is given the opportunity to see the variety and richness of their students' capabilities not only as language learners but also as creative and capable individuals.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have discussed the importance of using tasks for achieving meaningful oral output for the Japanese university English language learning environment. We have done so because tasks demand creative input from active learners which in turn is conducive to generating meaningful oral output. We have also provided examples of activities to illustrate how tasks can be incorporated into the classroom. Furthermore, we have discussed some concomitant benefits for the learner in using such an approach. A further step in this line of research would be to consider a methodology of using tasks specifically for oral output and to consider whether there is a basic core of dimensions for doing so.

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Appendix A

Further examples of task-based oral output activities

Conceptual Framework	A 90 minute exercise that is part of a textbook unit	A five-week exercise
1. Choose a target task.	To act out a scenario showing appropriate use of formal and informal language.	Make a video story (i.e. students must write and illustrate a story by themselves and then record it on video).
2. Create context.	Read a dialogue which illustrates formal and informal expressions for giving advice. Practice to familiarize students with the situation.	Show an example of a video story from previous years or provide own example.
3. Confirm understanding.	Ask students to read dialogue and identify rude language. Elicit responses and then ask students to change the rude statements into polite statements. Further confirm understanding of formal and informal expressions by deciding who could be speaking. For example, for question, *Could you come to my office?*, is it *Teacher to student? Teacher to teacher?*	Discuss aspects of the story with students so that they know what a video story entails. *What happened at the beginning of the story? In the middle? At the end?* *What did you see in the video? (Illustrations.)* *Who wrote the story? (The students.)*
4. Create the basis for the target task.	Give students different scenario cards. Each scenario has Person A (example: a teacher) and Person B (example: a student) and a situation in which one person must give advice (example: the student is not studying enough). Have learners practice verbalizing the advice.	Have students create an outline of their own story. Remind them that they can rely on their knowledge from previous study of English.

5. Authenticate the task linguistically.	Have learners practice scenario again. Add real-life details to conversation. *Instead of 'Could you study more?' you could say, 'Kathy, you failed your last test. You really ought to study more. You are very bright but you need to try harder.'*	Have students refine story and add more real-life linguistic details. *Instead of 'The house was dark' suggest learners write 'The old house looked haunted. There were no lights and people often said they could hear strange noises coming from the house at night.'* Then have them practice reading the story.
6. Authenticate the task non-linguistically.	Have learners practice scenario one more time. Add real-life non-linguistic details such as appropriate tone, facial expressions and gestures. *[In a firm voice.] 'Kathy, you failed your last test. [Shake head and look directly at partner.] You really ought to study more. [In a gentler voice.] You are very bright but you need to try harder.'*	Have students make illustrations for the story and then practice reading the story and use non-linguistic effects such as appropriate tone, rhythm and volume. [In a quiet voice.]'The old house looked haunted. [Pause.] There were no lights [pause] and people often said they could hear <u>strange</u> noises coming from the house at night.' [Make an eerie noise and use breath to create the effect of wind blowing.]
7. Perform the task.	Have the students perform their scenario for the class. Write characters on board and guess who is who. *Variation*: Have students make up their own scenario and do the same.	Students bring in completed video story and show to the instructor or class.