Task-based learning: Videotaping a documentary

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Reference data:
Evans, R.L. (2008). Task-based learning: Videotaping a documentary.
In K. Bradford Watts, T. Muller, & M. Swanson (Eds.), *JALT2007 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

Task-based instruction has gained much popularity. There is some disagreement as to what constitutes a task, but it most certainly covers a wide range of activities, from discrete pair-work activities to long-term projects. Students focus on meaning rather than form, using their language skills to perform the task. Long-term projects are particularly useful in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) context. This paper reviews a documentary style video project undertaken at a science college.

最近学生に作業をさせる指導法が増えてきた。そうした作業の内容には理論も見られるが、単純のペアワークによる作業から長時間かけて行うプロジェクトのように幅広い活動が含まれている。学生は、文法よりも意味に重点を置き自らの言語技能を使いながら作業を行う。長時間に渡るプロジェクトは特に特定の目的のための英語教育(ESP)二役立つ。

Task-based instruction (TBI) assumes the idea that genuine learning is best achieved through the interaction and negotiation of meaning involved in completing a real world task. The goal of a set task would be the logical result of the task, and independent of language learning per se. TBI may have arisen from content-based instruction (CBI), which is itself a result of the rise of communicative language teaching (CLT).

It could be said that we began our move toward CLT in the 1960's. Research into second language acquisition (SLA) in the 1960's and 1970's reinforced this movement toward a communicative approach to language learning. This was basically the motivation behind immersion schools, and, therefore, CBI. Teachers in CBI programs began using a task-based syllabus, and this came to be known as TBI (Willis 2004).

What is a task?

Not surprisingly, the various researchers who have investigated TBI have not exactly pinned down a consistent definition of what constitutes a task. Some have taken the term narrowly, while others define it more along the lines of the word's use in ordinary speech (Nunan 2004).

This paper will adopt a broader view. It is obvious that we want students to use language in the language classroom, and I see no reason to redefine the word. The following shows what I posit as the characteristics of a prototypical task for use in the language classroom.

1. Emphasis is on meaning over form. Ideally, tasks do not practice grammatical structures (form). Rather, the focus is on meaning, and the necessary language is used to complete the task.
2. There is some importance on the completion of the task. The task has some level of priority. The only linguistic requirement is that the target language is used during completion of the task.
3. It involves real-world language processes. False starts, hesitations, and so forth can be expected. Language use is spontaneous.
4. There is a predictable outcome or goal. Everyone knows the expected product or outcome.

By this definition, many pair- and group-work activities qualify as tasks. Many instructors are probably using them without realizing they are using tasks. Much of the literature focuses on such discrete activities that can be completed in pairs or small groups in the scope of one class session. Willis (1996), on the other hand, addresses a broader range of activity types, proposing the following as types of tasks:

1. Listing activities involve brainstorming and fact-finding. The outcome is the completed list.
2. Ordering and sorting activities involve sequencing, ranking, categorizing and classifying.
3. Comparing activities involve comparing information from different sources.
4. Problem solving activities require students to use intellectual and reasoning powers to solve some problem.
5. Sharing personal experiences gets students engaged in open-ended conversation.
6. Creative tasks, also called projects, engage students in some creative work. This could take a considerable amount of time, have several stages, and involve a number of various sub-tasks. Some out-of-class work or research, organizational skills, and teamwork may be required. Often the finished product can be enjoyed by a larger audience. (adapted from Willis, 1996)

Of the literature I looked at, only Willis (1996) addressed long-term creative projects in their assessment of tasks. However, such activities are very effective with our students who have grown up in the Japanese education system. They have studied English grammar for six years, and have had very little opportunity to engage in basic language skills such as the negotiation of meaning. Tasks take the emphasis off of how they use language (focus on form) and places it onto using their language skills as a means to an end (focus

on meaning). I believe that long-term multilevel tasks are particularly useful in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) setting, where content of the project can be attuned to the students' coursework.

This is not to say that long-term tasks are appropriate for any class. It is certainly better for some classes to try some less complex tasks that are completed more quickly and have more discrete goals. I offer the following as the ideal environment for long-range project tasks.

1. Class size should be small. Too many students will require that they work in smaller groups, making the whole project harder to manage.
2. Students should be motivated and dependable. If students are not interested in the project, the whole project will be of little value. Given the team effort required of such projects, undependable students can be a problem for everyone if they don't show up for important days. In light of this, I think big projects work best in elective courses.
3. The instructor must have confidence to lead the project. In an ideal world the projects are student-led, but a leader does not always emerge. The instructor is always the one ultimately in charge.

A long-term video project at a science college

I teach English at a high-tech college in Hokkaido. One of my courses is an elective for juniors and seniors, where I can expect five or fewer students (there is no limit on class size, merely that English elective courses do not draw many students). I had been trying to insert science content into my courses for quite a while, and wound up developing this video project. In this project, we perform simple science experiments on video in a documentary-style fashion. This has become an annual program that we call "Chitose Science World".

From the very beginning, there is often difficulty in scheduling because many necessary tasks simply cannot be done during our scheduled class time (see below). In light of this, class time becomes negotiable. We meet in my office every week during the scheduled class time, plot out our goals for that week, and schedule out the times that they can be done. Goals that can be completed in class are done right away. However, very often our meeting will last only 10 or 15 minutes, after which I let them go, on the understanding that they will attend all their appointments that week. The first half of the term is usually taken up performing the experiments, and the latter half shooting the documentary.

The experiment phase

Students must gain confidence in their chosen experiments. I impress on them that in the video, I will act as documentary host, and will pretend that I have never seen their experiment before. Therefore, they must present themselves as experts while on video, so it's important to become familiar and confident in their experiment (and doing it in English!). I call the stages of the experiment phase Selection, Preparation, and Execution.

Selection

Students choose a science experiment that is suitable for American high school or junior high school students and obtain English instructions, usually by downloading them from the Internet. Students who haven't any idea are directed to an Internet site where there is a large collection of science fair projects. There isn't particularly a lot of time, one semester, so they must choose as quickly as possible. Sometimes experiments are turned away, either because they are too expensive (I tell them to do an experiment within 10,000 yen, for which I have funding), or because they require equipment that is not available in Japan.

Preparation

Once the experiments are chosen, we gather the materials we need. This may involve sending students to other departments (e.g., to the chemistry lab to order chemicals), sending them off shopping, or going shopping together. Class time does not always coincide with the times that stores are open, so we may have to schedule time outside of class.

In addition to gathering materials, students must become familiar with the science behind the experiment. I send them to other teachers to learn of these things. Chemistry experiments are popular, which works very well for me because our chemist is a German who speaks excellent English. He speaks to my students in English, plus he explains the scientific concepts to me. This is a big help. I learn as much as my students sometimes. In fact, remember these are juniors and seniors in a science university, so I learn things from my students as well, and they benefit from explaining things to me in English.

Execution

Once we are ready to perform the experiments, we schedule time in the laboratory. The students need little direction; they are more familiar with the laboratory than I am. They gather together the beakers and such; however, if we need to use fire then the instructor must take charge of the bunsen burners. Experiments sometimes do not work well the first time. I encourage students to explain what they think might have gone wrong and what they will do next.

The video phase

When the experiment is ready, we begin making the video. I want the videos to be spontaneous, and unrehearsed, but the students find this to be too intimidating. I try to give them enough structure so that they feel comfortable, while also trying to retain a feel of spontaneity. The three stages of the video phase are Writing, Shooting, and Editing.

Writing the script

The first plan for the first Chitose Science World was that the video would be unscripted, but students quickly made it clear that that is too intimidating for them. So most student lines are scripted. By this time, students have learned a lot of vocabulary related to their experiment, and using these they write their own script. Then I look at their finished script and tweak it for them. Some students need extensive coaching, others can work more on their own.

Shooting the video

When we are ready to shoot, we schedule time with the media lab. This also works splendidly because the person in charge of the media lab, although Japanese, speaks excellent English. She speaks Japanese to my students, and she speaks English to my students, but she speaks only English to me. Nothing more than the students seeing that, as a role model, is important.

Our cameramen are volunteer students. These are students that want to be accepted into the media lab for their graduation research, so it is to their advantage to learn how to use the equipment. So although they don't get any credit for my class, there is an advantage for them to film Chitose Science World. We film interview scenes in the studio and experiment scenes on location in the laboratory.

Editing the video

Media students do not edit Chitose Science World for me; we must do that ourselves. So I have my students do it in my office using Apple iMovie. We get all the video clips on CD-R from the media lab, we piece them together, add transitions and our soundtrack. I keep the user interface menus of my computer set to English, so students use the software with all English menus. I approve the final version and make them tweak it until it is just right.

Grading

Their final grade is on the finished project. It's an elective, so grading need not be stringent. Anyone who completes a project and appears in the video will pass. Any student who makes every scheduled appointment and tries to use English will get an "A". Furthermore, I don't give failing grades in this course. If a student fails to complete a project and appear in the video, I identify him as a student who failed to come to class. This grading policy is explained to students on the first day.

Future of the course

One of the beautiful things about this course in its current form is that it is completely spontaneous. Even I don't know what to expect. Problem-solving is a big part of every day. The only thing I can really control is scheduling - which does need to be improved. We always get busier at the end of the term. I need to try to push students along their tasks so we don't have so much left to do late in the game.

Having said that, the truth is that this course in its current form is to be discontinued. Its success having gained institutional recognition, it is to become one choice for a required "second year project" (rather than "elective course," its current form). As a project, we will have more time, three semesters rather than one. With more time, I plan to put more responsibility on students, assigning tasks and allowing them to succeed, or fail, in completing them. I may even open up the choice of projects, to include dramatizations or other projects.

Pedagogy behind Chitose Science World

I think making Chitose Science World is a valuable experience for my students, in that they get the chance to use real-world language processes. They negotiate meaning, learn an (albeit simple) experiment related to their studies

in some depth in English. Since students choose their experiments themselves, they learn vocabulary that is virtually of their own choosing.

Although the student's lines are largely scripted, they write their own script. Although I do tweak their English, the words are largely their own. For many students, this is the first time they have created anything original in English.

And most importantly, they interact with me 100% in English throughout the project; I direct them while doing the experiments, during the shooting, and while using the editing tools (iMovie). This is not so very easy, for either of us, since these students are actually quite low level.

Application in other classes

Of course, there is no reason to believe that a video project like this would work for everyone. This project took about five years to develop into its current state. In addition, I have several things going for me, as identified in the following:

1. Institutional support. Our media lab is actually rather new, and the institution seems rather keen on it. They are very pleased that I am making use of the media lab.
2. Help from staff and colleagues. I could not see pulling this off without the help of the media lab staff and our chemist.
3. Personal background. In my early adulthood I was very active in amateur theatre. Although my experience was mostly in stage theatre, I have also worked in video. My background gave me the confidence to believe I could make a documentary.

Therefore, I am not suggesting that everyone should run off and start doing videos. However, there are more possible projects than just video. Media capabilities on the most basic home computers currently available can make highly sophisticated material in video, audio, and desktop publishing. Teachers in specialty colleges, like myself, can surely develop a large scale media project based on their students' needs. If nothing else, some instructors might want to try a desktop publication such as "this year in pictures" based on their institution or perhaps a news magazine or other project. Some classes could make a website. Audio projects could be possible. I am aware of a group of English learners who are removing spoken dialogue from Japanese videos and dubbing them in English. In my case, that is beyond my current mastery of the technology, so I could never ask students to undertake such a project. But this may appeal to more knowledgeable instructors. In any case, students could come up with most of the material, and the instructor should simply direct the logistics of putting it together.

Conclusion

Task-based instruction has gained much popularity during the last 40 years, and I believe it is particularly useful at specialized colleges. TBI focuses on meaning rather than form, which is itself an appropriate approach for Japanese students. Most Japanese college students have a firm grounding in English grammar from junior high and high school, but have had very little opportunity to use communicative language skills.

TBI can take many forms. Tasks can be discrete exercises that can be completed in the classroom, or can be large projects composed of many sub-tasks. Especially at specialized colleges, ESP instruction could greatly benefit from leading students through a large scale media project, based on their area of study. My science documentary for science majors is such a case. Students perform simple experiments on video, documentary style.

The possible applications of similar approaches in video, audio, or desktop publishing are vast and myriad. It just takes a little creativity, some organizational skills, and determination. Everyone benefits, the biggest beneficiaries being our students.

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