

Efforts to Introduce TBL into a University Program

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Abstract:

In recent years the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in Japan has expressed its desire for English language educators to move away from more traditional teacher-centered models of instruction and adopt approaches that focus on communication skills and group work. This paper reports on a project that attempts to respond to this objective, describing efforts to introduce ‘tasks’ into a university-level EFL program. The paper begins by outlining the rationale for selecting tasks to develop communication skills. The paper then describes how an ordering and sorting task was designed and administered to a class of adult learners of English at APU Ritsumeikan University to develop their oral communication strategies and to draw the learners’ attention to the usage of potentially problematic features of the language such as articles. The paper then reports how these efforts led to the wider use of tasks in an EFL curriculum and concludes by discussing the issues that arose from using tasks in this particular learning context.

Key terms: task, MEXT, curriculum, communication, communication strategies

Introduction

Of all the four skills that students learn, speaking seems intuitively the most important. Indeed, the majority of foreign language learners are interested in learning how to speak. Bygate describes speaking as the skill by which learners are most often judged, and through which people make or lose friends (1987). Most people would also acknowledge that as a result of globalization, communication between nations is more important than ever. For many years, Japanese language classrooms placed a greater emphasis on traditional methods such as Grammar Translation, and only recently has the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) expressed its desire for English language educators to develop a more communicative approach towards English Language instruction. MEXT feels it is essential for students to acquire communication abilities in English because it is a common international language. Current methods of instruction throughout Japan are being modified, and teachers are starting to respond to this objective by designing courses that place a greater emphasis on oral group work and student interaction. Current methods of instruction for the intermediate-level program at Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (APU) have an emphasis on developing speaking and writing skills and on developing test taking strategies. However, tasks were not used as a methodology. This paper reports on efforts to introduce tasks into the intermediate-level university EFL program. The purpose of this paper is to investigate whether using tasks in this particular learning context, with this specific type of learner, could be beneficial. The paper begins by defining ‘tasks’ and outlines the rationale for selecting tasks to develop communication skills. The paper then describes how an ordering and sorting task was designed and administered to a class of 24 adult learners of English to develop their oral

communication strategies and to draw the learners’ attention to the problems posed by English articles. The findings show the use of communication strategies such as *negotiation skills and agenda management* (Bygate, 1987) and some correct usage of the English article system. The paper concludes by reporting on how these efforts led to the wider use of tasks in an EFL curriculum and discusses issues that arose from using tasks in this particular learning context.

Defining ‘task’ and the rationale behind using tasks

A considerable amount of second language task literature has been concerned with a search for a definition of the term ‘task’. There have been numerous different definitions and counter definitions provided, with the result that the term ‘task’ remains somewhat difficult to define. For the purpose of this paper we have decided to use a working definition of a second language pedagogic task provided by Samuda and Bygate (2008). This definition summarizes what tasks are intended to do and highlights the features that a task *should* have, rather than what a task *could* have. This helps to distinguish tasks from other types of pedagogical activities and has the benefit of making the selection of tasks more straightforward and manageable for teachers.

A task is a holistic activity which engages language use in order to achieve some non-linguistic outcome while meeting a linguistic challenge, with the overall aim of promoting language learning through process, product or both (Samuda & Bygate, 2008, p. 69).

This definition shows several key points regarding tasks. First, holistic refers to the fact that a task should involve the learners dealing with aspects of language such as phonology, grammar, vocabulary, and discourse together, through a practical situation, in the way language is normally used. Second, a task cannot be considered communicative unless the language is used for a purpose other than for the learning of language. Third, there is no point in using a task unless it involves some kind of linguistic challenge. It is important to note that the teacher should be aware of what the linguistic challenges may be when selecting a task. A fourth point is that tasks are used pedagogically to teach language: this is their ultimate justification, and if they do not help language learning they probably will not be justified. Finally, “through process”, tasks should help learners improve their fluency and accuracy in the use of familiar language and develop the complexity of sentences they are able to produce. Or develop strategies for dealing with communication challenges, and “through product” learners can focus on phonological, grammatical and discourse features needed to work towards the outcome of the task (Samuda & Bygate, 2008).

PRE-TASK Introduction to topic and task
TASK CYCLE Task Planning Report
LANGUAGE FOCUS Analysis and practice

Willis (1996) provides a framework for task-based learning (TBL) where the task becomes the central component of a three-part framework (see table 1). First, there is a “pre-task” stage where the topic and task are introduced. Next comes the “task cycle” where students do the task in pairs or small groups, prepare to report to the class on how they completed the task, and then present their reports to the class and compare results. The final stage is the “language focus”, where learners are given the opportunity to analyze and practice the language used. Willis (1997) argues that this framework offers an alternative to grammar practice routines and offers more opportunity to learn to communicate.

*Table 1: Framework for TBL
(Adapted from Willis, 1996, p.60)*

Willis (1997) also identifies six different types of activities that have the potential to become tasks, with each type involving different cognitive processes.

1. **Listing:** brainstorming and fact-finding
2. **Ordering and sorting:** sequencing, ranking, categorizing, classifying
3. **Comparing and matching:** finding similarities and differences
4. **Creative:** project work
5. **Problem solving:** analyzing situations, reasoning, and decision making
6. **Sharing personal experiences:** explaining attitudes, opinions and reactions

Along with the definition provided by Samuda and Bygate (2008) this list of potential tasks makes the selection and development of tasks more straightforward and manageable for teachers. This classification also helps material writers to generate a variety of tasks on whatever topic is selected.

Selecting and developing a task

In 2003, MEXT stated English ability is important in terms of linking Japan with the rest of the world. MEXT would like language teachers to replace teacher-centered lessons with activities that focus on communication skills and group work. This goal would appear to match the communicative rationale behind using tasks in the classroom. Speaking and communicating with others is considered the basis for second language acquisition in task-based learning, in which language is learned to be used, and therefore learners should practice using it (Bygate, 1987). In addition, using language can enable the linguistic forms to become embedded in deeper personal and social meanings (Allwright, 1984; Brumfit, 1984). Tasks are also said to improve learner motivation and therefore promote learning. This is because they require authentic language use, and meaningful language is presumably more motivating and hence more learnable (VanPatten, 1996).

Our study arose out of a desire to test the feasibility of using tasks in a university-level EFL program to engage students in using English in the classroom, and to respond to MEXT's call for teachers to focus on communication skills and group work. The literature appears to show that tasks can be used effectively to improve communication skills. Our objective was, therefore, to develop, implement then analyze one 'task' where learners would use English to complete a meaningful communicative activity. This would then enable us to evaluate whether using tasks in a learning environment of approximately twenty intermediate level students in a multilingual class would be suitable. Using the definition of a task provided by Samuda and Bygate (2008), and the six different types of activities that have the potential to become tasks (Willis, 1997), a task was developed.

Proponents of *a task for language focus* argue that communication tasks cannot only encourage learners to engage in using the target language, but can be used effectively to lead learners to work with aspects of language (Yule and Macdonald, 1990; Mackey, 1999; Samuda, 2001). For example, Loschly and Bley-Vroman (1993) noted that, in certain tasks, certain features of language would arise naturally. For instance, when giving a narrative, learners are likely to use the definite article correctly. With this in mind an ordering and sorting task was designed with the aims of promoting communication strategies and of drawing the learners' attention to the usage of potentially problematic features of the article system. The Japanese language does not have an article

system and even the most advanced Japanese learners find articles problematic, mistaking the use of the zero, definite and indefinite article (Butler, 2002).

The task would be administered to a class of 24 students enrolled in a university-level EFL program in Japan. The ordering and sorting task would be a picture-sequencing task (see table 2). Students would work in-groups of six and each member would be given a picture from a story. They would then describe their picture, in order to recover and tell the complete story. The group would then choose one member to narrate the whole story to the other groups. Finally, the students would write a summary of the story.



Table 2: Picture-sequencing task

Pre-task

Following the framework for task-based learning provided by Willis (1996), the pre-task stage saw the students put into four groups of six people. The teacher provided useful vocabulary and phrases, and helped the learners understand the task instructions. The students were reminded to communicate in English and asked not to show their picture to the others in their group.

Task-cycle

During the “task cycle” the students completed the picture-sequencing task in their groups. The data from one group, selected at random, was recorded and this recording was analyzed (see table 3). The outcome was encouraging as the data showed learners using communication strategies to deal with communication challenges that the task posed. Students had to use *negotiation skills* (Bygate, 1987) to achieve an overall understanding of the story. In order to complete this stage of the task, the students had to communicate their ideas clearly and make their ideas understood. Table 3, lines 1 to 6, shows an example of students doing this. Student A begins the task by informing the group that there is a man and a woman who are drinking in the picture he has been given. Student B then requests confirmation on the number of female characters in that picture. Student C then asks whether the male character is foreign, and student A confirms he is. In this short extract three students have

successfully identified the characters in the story.

Bygate notes “in spoken language, understanding is assumed to have taken place by the end of a conversation unless it has been shown to be otherwise” (1987, p.29). The purpose of the task cycle was to describe the pictures and agree on the order of the pictures in order to create a story. Lines 13 to 17 show this occurring as the students successfully confirm the correct order of the pictures.

1 Student A: “a man and a woman is drinking in my picture”	
2 All students: “oh”	
3 Student B: “two girls?”	
4 Student A: “no one girl.”	
5 Student C: “he is a foreigner?”	
6 Student A: “yes”	

7 Student C: “I’m next...my picture is a person, maybe he is....”	
8 Student A: “white, white?”	
9 Student C: “yes! he has a lottery, lottery, so very yeah” (student gestures happiness) “his face is happy”	
10 Student A: “ah, sorry I forget, somebody is stealing wallet, his wallet”	
11 All students: “ohhh!”	
12 Student B: “wow!”	

13 Student E: “one, two, three, four..and five is he pick up his wallet and go to..”	
14 Student B “ah, go to the police..”	
15 Student A: “probably four, five...”	
16 Student D: “one, two, three, four, five, six	
17 All students: “OK, OK”	

Table 3: Task Cycle Extract 1

As a group, the students also had to manage their interaction, agreeing on who would speak and what they would discuss. The students had to start, maintain, direct and end a group conversation without conforming to any script and without the intervention of a third party. This aspect of interaction is termed *Agenda Management* (Bygate, 1987). In line 1 Student A begins the task without any prompting from the teacher and in line 17 all students agree on the order of the story, thus ending the task cycle.

The students also had to be efficient at taking the opportunity to speak and allow others in the group to have a turn otherwise they would not have been able to complete the story. Bygate (1987) terms this *Turn Taking*. Line 7 shows an example of turn taking, where Student C indicates that it is her turn to talk by stating, “I’m next”. Then in line 10 Student A realizes he has forgotten information that could be valuable for completing the task and waits for the opportunity to add further information about his picture.

The second stage of the task-cycle involved the group electing one member to narrate the story to the other groups. Here there was evidence of learners using vocabulary provided during the pre-task phase and some

correct usage of the definite article. Table 4 shows instances of correct article usage. During the narration Student E successfully uses the indefinite article on the first mention of the main character then correctly switches to the definite article in his second reference to that character. On line 1 there is an example of the student using some of the target vocabulary for this task when he initially states, “another man picks his wallet up and his pocket”, but then self-corrects and uses, “steals his wallet”. Steal and wallet were two vocabulary words taught during the pre-task stage.

1 Student E: “ah..ok..in first picture ah **a** man buying lotto in You Me Town lottery shop and second picture **the** man wins a prize.”

2 Student E: “fifth picture..erm..another man picks his wallet up and his pocket and steals his wallet but he don’t notice.”

Table 4: Task Cycle Extract 2

Language-focus

During this stage of the lesson the students were asked to write a summary of the story they had just sequenced. The teacher then provided some basic information about using articles and the students were encouraged to examine and discuss their text before self-editing their work.

Justification for using tasks in a curriculum

We set out to discover whether using tasks in this particular learning context with this type of learner would be a suitable methodology to employ to meet the goal of a focus on communication (MEXT). Our findings tentatively allowed us to conclude that this could be the case. First, the task allowed students the opportunity to use communication strategies to deal with challenges that arose. Second, the task elicited some correct usage of the article system. Finally, the learners used what language they wanted, freeing them to focus entirely on the meaning of their message, and the students appeared to be motivated by this. This study was conducted with a class of 24 intermediate level students and the results were encouraging enough to consider implementing tasks into an intermediate level curriculum. However, factors such as class size and the ability of students needed to be taken into consideration. Certain courses within the Intermediate level are much larger in size than the class size in this particular study, which would make implementation rather problematic in terms of being able to manage the task. In addition, although the students at this level had the ability to complete the task, it is not certain whether students of a lower level would be able to.

Currently tasks are being implemented in an intermediate level curriculum as a means of language learning and language assessment. The use of tasks in the course is ongoing and the results are yet to be discussed. However, issues have arisen since the implementation of tasks, providing opportunities for further areas of research. One such issue stems from teacher observations in which teachers noticed some learners having difficulties using certain types of language. For example, some students found it difficult disagreeing. One possible explanation for this could be that traditional methods for language learning in Asian countries do not follow a communicative approach. Another possible explanation might be that Asian students are not accustomed to disagreeing in public. This warrants further research into the role of culture and how this

influences learners' performance in tasks and what steps could be taken to overcome these learner difficulties. A separate issue relates to using task-based assessment. Deciding what areas of language use were to be assessed proved problematic. For example, whether to assess certain language forms such as giving opinions and asking questions, or, as Claudio Passos De Oliveira argues, avoid assessing language form altogether and instead focus on assessing fluency, accuracy and complexity are issues that need to be resolved (2004).

Conclusion

This paper reported on a project that examined the use of tasks as a means to achieve MEXTs' desire for English educators to adopt a more communicative approach for English language instruction. Having established that tasks could be a method used to meet this objective, this paper set out to establish whether tasks could be suitable for learners in a university EFL context. The findings of the study showed that tasks could be used to develop students' oral communication strategies such as *Negotiation Skills and Agenda Management* (Bygate, 1987). The task was successful in eliciting some correct usage of the English article system, and the task also appeared to be a motivating method of language learning. It was tentatively concluded from these findings that tasks could be used to improve communication skills of intermediate learners in this context. This study, though, was not without its limitations. The study used only one of the six types of tasks identified by Willis (1997) and it is preferable that students are exposed to a variety of tasks. Having different types of tasks will broaden learners' language experience and improve vocabulary, while helping to prevent boredom (Willis, 1996, p.55). In addition, the task was conducted with only one intermediate class so generalizations cannot be made on the effectiveness of using different tasks within other levels at the university or with larger classes. The results did, however, justify implementing tasks into an intermediate level EFL curriculum, which is currently an ongoing process, the success of which can only be judged with further research at the end of the semester.

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