Designing and Implementing Task-Based Lessons to Low Proficiency EFL Learners at a Japanese University

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Introduction

This paper argues for the use of a Task-Based Approach (TBA) with Japanese University EFL learners whose language proficiency is not particularly high (approximate TOEIC level <300). A sequence of tasks was used in a comprehensive English class which focused on listening and speaking. The comments of low-proficiency students showed changes in their attitudes regarding L2 learning after experiencing TBA. The following sections include a brief overview of the use of tasks in language pedagogy, a review of the literature, an example of utilization and/or application of task design, and a consideration of the importance of pre-tasks.

Tasks in language pedagogy

Designing tasks is a central feature of language pedagogy practice, and the task is also a theoretical construct in need of investigation (e.g., Ellis, 2005; Seedhouse, 2005) which has attracted considerable attention in second language acquisition (SLA) research in the last few years. The design and implementation of task sequencing is considered central to enhancing learners' motivation and sustaining their efforts to learn the L2. This is because tasks require students to work together to use language functionally to solve problems that relate to some degree to the tasks that students may need to accomplish using English skills in real-world situations (Lambert & Engler, 2007; see also, Long, 2000, Skehan, 1996).

Method

In order to promote a task framework in a language classroom, a sequence of pedagogic tasks were adopted, taking into consideration students' language level and favorite activities. Students were organized into either a pair or a group to work on tasks in order to use English functionally and to solve problems. The tasks were mostly creative in nature, as many of the students were involved in art and design courses; other tasks, such as information gap tasks, compare-and-contrast tasks, including both non-fixed solution (open) and fixed solution (closed) types were also given in order to facilitate language performance and development. Jane Willis's framework for task-based learning (1996) was used to categorize task types in English lessons, and the task cycles were applied as follows: pre-task, main-task, and post-task. In the pre-task, new vocabulary and grammar were introduced, as well as listening and conversation practices from a textbook. In the main-

task, students were asked to either pair up or make a group to do a task sheet. For example, in one of the creative tasks, students were asked to invite famous actors and actresses to a house party. First, individual students had to think by themselves in terms of what to bring, what to make, who to invite, and so on; then they discuss this party scenario with their partners, and make an invitation card. In the post-task, students have an opportunity to express their ideas and/or opinions in front of the class, and/or a writing task is given to assess students' understanding.

Students' changes in attitude towards English lessons

Changes were observed in students' attitudes towards language learning. Many students showed a tendency toward higher enjoyment of English classes, and increased comprehension as shown in the following interview transcript excerpts.

(Student A)
April 11, 2011.
"I did not like and did not understand English at all up to now, so I was worried about the class. But the class was actually more enjoyable than I'd expected."

June 13, 2011.
"I started to understand English better than before. Because I understood a bit, I was more enthusiastic in English class."

July 25, 2011.
"We did a presentation. I was amused by my classmates as they did so well. I enjoyed it a lot" (Translations mine).

(Student B)
April 18, 2011.
"My partner asked me some questions, but it was difficult for me to answer. I also did not understand some vocabulary either."

May 16, 2011.
"I think I am able to understand a bit more English compared to earlier in the semester."

July 4, 2011.
"Now, I am able to read a bit more. I think I understand grammar more than before." (Nishida, 2012, p.25).

Students seemed to show less confidence in themselves earlier in the semester, but toward the end of the semester, they slowly seemed to show more confidence in themselves, when they were more able to do tasks that were provided in class. This is because they started to understand English better than earlier in the semester which made them enjoy the classes. Confidence is known to be a vital factor for language learning (Nishida & Yashima, 2009).

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The importance of the pre-task

To foster students' language development, especially students with low language proficiency levels, I believe it is necessary to re-familiarize them with basic grammar and vocabulary as well as to warm up their

listening and communication skills in the pre-task. Through reviewing and re-learning the basic grammar and vocabulary as well as activating the communication and listening skills that they will use in the main task, students are able to work comfortably on tasks with their partners. Thus, it can be said that a pre-task plays a vital role for students with lower language proficiency levels. Secondly, tasks need to be created which are graded and sequenced according to the students' level of understanding. For learners of lower proficiency levels, it may be better to integrate closed versions of tasks before providing open versions, as open versions can be more challenging for these students. The implementation and the timing of delivery of both the open and closed versions of tasks need to be used promoted accordingly. Lastly, as this paper describes, we saw changes in students' own perception of their language learning as well as changes in language proficiency level. TBA can be of great benefit to teaching practices, as it can promote balanced language development, particularly in terms of complexity of production.

About the author

Rieko Nishida, Ph.D. is a lecturer at Osaka University. Her research interest has been social and educational psychology of second language learning. She is especially interested in the influence of motivation and other psychological factors in language learning among children and Japanese University EFL learners.
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