Teaching Practice

Task-Based Learning for Communication and Grammar Use

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Abstract

Research has shown how tasks can improve L2 oral skills in different ways (Ellis, 2005). The effectiveness of task-based learning has drawn interest within Asian educational contexts which have been accustomed to more traditional methods of language instruction. Authorities in these contexts have recently started to express a desire for more communicative oral syllabuses. However, large class sizes, inadequate financial support, and teacher time constraints at many institutions have often made the implementation of task-based learning problematic. This paper attempts to address these issues by reporting action research on an interactive task designed by teachers on a limited budget for use in an intermediate-level university classroom in Japan. It describes how the task was used to facilitate interaction and use of a specific grammar form, English articles.

Task-based learning (TBL) has attracted significant interest ever since it was first implemented on a major scale in India during the early 1980s, and later published in Prabhu (1987). Numerous task-based studies since (e.g., Mackey, 1999, Mochizuki & Ortega, 2008) have investigated how oral tasks in particular can be designed to elicit certain grammatical structures which learners can use successfully in communication. Task-based research devoted towards second language (L2) oral communication is of particular relevance to Asian educational contexts, where East Asian governments have in recent times placed an emphasis on improving Asian learners' oral skills (Sakui, 2004).

The aim of this study was to gain greater understanding of the role which task-based learning could play in a curriculum in an Asian context where, traditionally, large class sizes, limited financial support, and teacher time constraints have hindered the use of TBL. Other difficulties, such as limited teaching resources, also prevent the successful implementation of TBL courses, according to Adams and Newton (2009). The main objective of this study was therefore to ascertain whether teachers under time constraints and with a limited budget could successfully

trial a task-based lesson aimed to promote communication and grammar use within a large class at a university in Japan.

The paper begins by defining tasks and then demonstrates how oral tasks can be used in the classroom, referring to Willis' (1996) TBL framework as a guideline. It then discusses advantages and disadvantages of TBL within the Asian context and describes in detail how an interactive task was designed and used in an intermediate-level university classroom in Japan to promote L2 interaction and grammar use, specifically targeting English articles. Finally, the paper reflects on the effectiveness of the task and methodology used as a means to promote L2 communication within a large class.

Tasks and Their Use as Teaching Tools

Bygate, Skehan, and Swain define a task as "an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective" (2001, p. 11). Tasks therefore allow learners to communicate freely in the L2 to achieve some sort of real-world goal. However, for language learning to take place, there needs to be some attention towards language form; learners need to be corrected on mistakes made during communication and to be introduced to new forms of grammar or vocabulary that they can incorporate into their language repertoire. There are various ways language form can be attended to when using tasks, although the TBL approach most widely regarded is that of Willis' (1996) framework.

Willis' (1996) Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) Framework

This framework promotes language teaching around a task with three main stages:

- **Pre-task:** introduction to the topic and task, preparation
- **Task cycle:** task performance, planning and report
- **Language focus:** language analysis, practice

The pre-task stage involves the teacher providing instructions about the task and having the class brainstorm any useful vocabulary that the learners may already know which could help them during the task. According to Willis (1996), the purpose of the pre-task stage is to activate students' own linguistic resources to prepare them for the task cycle. The task cycle consists of learners participating in the main task in groups, pairs, or individually, depending on whether the task is interactive. In the task cycle, the learners use their existing linguistic skills to complete the task while the teacher serves as a facilitator, only providing assistance when necessary. On completing the task cycle, each group collectively prepares a report on its findings and presents the report to the rest of the class, with the teacher only commenting as needed. Finally, in the language focus part of the lesson, students are directed towards analysing the language forms used during the task. According to Willis, students should already be "familiar with the meanings expressed" since they "now have the chance to study the forms which realise those meanings" (1996, p. 102). The teacher is advised to use this part of the lesson to allow learners to notice new forms of language and then practice using them in various activities.

TBL in Asia

It has been well documented in recent times how East Asian governments have been pushing for more communicative approaches towards language learning (Sakui, 2004). For example, for a decade, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (2003) in Japan has expressed the need for improvements in university students' use of English. This is due to dissatisfaction with traditional methods of language learning focusing heavily on

grammatical syllabuses and thus contributing to a lack of L2 oral proficiency for graduates. Consequently, at the university level in Japan, there has been a drive for teaching approaches that focus on improving learners' communicative competence and speaking skills. Oral tasks have been used as a means to help achieve this aim.

Numerous experimental studies within Asian contexts have shown how oral tasks can be used in different ways to influence learners' L2 speaking skills (e.g., Mochizuki & Ortega, 2008; Robinson, 2001). Willis' (1996) TBLT framework also provides guidelines for teachers to use tasks in the classroom. However, for reasons already mentioned, successful implementation of TBL has been problematic in some classroom contexts in Asia. Given the desire for a more communicative approach towards language teaching, along with the issue posed by large classes, the authors were thus interested in carrying out a small-scale action research study, as described by Robson (2002), in an attempt to improve current methods and procedures. Specifically, the researchers wanted to see whether TBL could function effectively in a large-sized class at a university in Japan. The authors decided to design an oral interactive task that could be replicated by teachers who have limited resources, and then implement a task-based lesson that could facilitate both L2 interaction and grammar use. The targeted grammar form for this study was the use of English articles, specifically indefinite, definite, and zero articles, well known to be problematic for Asian learners (Butler, 2002).

The Study

Participants and Teaching Context

The participants were 36 students in a lower-intermediate level English class at an international university in Japan. The participants' TOEFL scores ranged approximately from 400 to 450. They were between 18 and 21 years old, and they were studying a wide range of academic subjects within their major studies. Some of the students had travelled abroad as part of study-abroad programs. The data for this study was collected during a regular class. The task was administered as a supplement to the regular curriculum, which focused on speaking, listening, and vocabulary. The class was divided into six groups of six people, and one group was chosen at random for data collection. In Japan, socio-cultural traditions mean some students are less willing to participate in discussions; to minimize this limitation, students were allowed to select their own groups. At the start of the lesson, the purpose of the research was read aloud to the participants and verbal consent was obtained from all participants.

Selecting and Designing an Interactive Task

There were a number of key considerations regarding the selection and design of the interactive tasks for this study. The first was to develop tasks so that they complemented the content and the existing materials used in the course. In this case, the course was a general English program with a focus on speaking, vocabulary, and listening. It was the researchers' intention therefore to select and design tasks that would facilitate oral communication and use of specific vocabulary taken from a module that focused on money, the aim being to promote students' use of the targeted vocabulary.

The researchers made use of Willis' (1998) comprehensive list of activities that teachers can consider when creating tasks:

1. Listing: brainstorming
2. Ordering and sorting: sequencing and categorizing
3. Comparing and matching: finding similarities
4. Creative: project work
5. Problem solving: analysing and decision making
6. Sharing personal experiences: expressing opinions

The researchers decided that an ordering and sorting task that involved sequencing and categorising pictures relating to the topic of money would be most suitable. The researchers then developed a story-telling narrative that consisted of six pictures relating to the content of the course. The story involves a man who buys a lottery ticket and wins the lottery, then later loses his lottery ticket and wallet when he is out celebrating with his friends. The authors considered this task-type desirable because learners would be required to communicate in the L2 to sequence the pictures in the correct order. Furthermore, stories could involve the use of English articles, therefore enabling the task to elicit the targeted form. For example, the man's actions were illustrated in each picture, thus eliciting the use of the indefinite and definite articles, e.g., *a* man versus *the* man. The pictures, taken using a disposable camera, contextualized the background environment for learners, thus helping them to understand and complete the task.

To accommodate large class sizes, the task pictures were replicated with slight alterations so that each group would have a slightly different story to solve. These changes related to characters and objects, e.g., a woman wins the lottery instead of a man or a bag is lost instead of a wallet. Consequently, each group of students had a unique story that consisted of six pictures. An important point to note is that although the storylines were different, the tasks remained the same in terms of complexity, i.e., the linguistic demands of the stories were equal in terms of complex vocabulary and grammar use. The researchers followed Willis' (1996) TBLT framework in designing the activity.

Pre-Task Cycle

The pre-task stage involved the teacher giving the instructions of the task to the class. Within each group, each student was allocated one picture and was told to describe the picture, but not show it to the other members of the group. The teacher provided some vocabulary on the whiteboard for each group to use in the task. The teacher also encouraged the learners to try to use *a* and *the* when describing and sequencing the pictures. Although Willis (1996) does not advocate the pre-instruction of vocabulary and grammar use, the authors felt that in this context, providing useful vocabulary would help the learners successfully complete the task cycle. As they were investigating learners' use of English articles, a lack of guidance could have resulted in the task's failure to elicit the targeted form, as students could substitute article use for other linguistic forms such as pronouns.

Finally, to prevent the groups from using their L1 to complete the task, the teacher informed the class that each group had a different story, and that each group would have to present their unique story to the rest of the class in English after they had completed the task. It was therefore important for all of the students to speak only English during the task.

Task Cycle

The first part of the task cycle involved the learners describing their pictures and then sequencing them in the correct order. The purpose of this initial stage of the cycle was to allow learners to engage in free L2 communication to agree on the sequence of the photos. During

this stage of the lesson, the teacher served as facilitator, monitoring each group's performance and providing assistance when necessary. An example of the language used from the recorded group was transcribed and analysed. This part of the task appeared to be successful, as the learners used a variety of communication strategies to complete the task. For example, the students used negotiation skills to clarify and understand the characters in the pictures. Figure 1 illustrates this. Student A begins by telling the group that there is a man and woman drinking in his picture. Student B then checks the number of females in the picture. Student C then asks if the man is a foreigner, and Student A affirms that he is. This dialogue shows how the students successfully negotiated with each other in the L2 to confirm the characters of the story.

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

Figure 1. Students verifying information

Another communication strategy, presented in Figure 2, shows the students confirming and agreeing on the correct order of the photos. Students E, B, and A clarify the order of the photos, which is then confirmed by Student D, who successfully sequences the photos. All of the students in the group agree with the order by saying "OK, OK." It is important to note however, that students' use of phrases such as "OK, OK" may not have the same intention that the teacher assumes (Samuda & Bygate, 2008). For example, students might produce this language as a strategy to avoid speaking or to prematurely end the task, rather than to suggest they understand the order of the photos. In this particular case, the authors believed that the students produced this language to show agreement about the order of the photos. However, in future studies, clarification with the learners after they complete the task is suggested.

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

Figure 2. Students confirming and agreeing on information

In the second part of the task cycle, one student from each group narrated the story to the rest of the class. First, the groups were allowed a few minutes of planning time to practice telling their story in the L2. This gave the students the opportunity to use the vocabulary provided in the pre-task and to practice using the indefinite and definite articles correctly. Then one student from each group was nominated to perform their narration. Figure 3 provides an example of this.

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

Figure 3. Student narrating story

In Line 1 of Figure 3, Student E uses the indefinite article when mentioning the man for the first time, and then successfully uses the definite article thereafter. Line 2 also shows Student E successfully using some of the vocabulary words (*wallet* and *steal*) that were taught during the pre-task stage.

Language Focus

During this stage of the lesson, learners' attention was drawn to the correct use of English articles. After writing a summary of their story, the students worked in pairs, examining their texts and editing any errors that they noticed. The teacher also provided feedback about the correct use of articles. The students then orally practiced their narration in pairs before rewriting an improved version of their text. This process led to improved use of the targeted form.

Discussion

After analysing the language produced by the recorded group, the authors were satisfied with the ordering and sorting task as a means to facilitate L2 interaction and use of the targeted form. The recorded group produced examples of L2 communication strategies as they sequenced the order of the pictures; they also produced English articles, especially during the narration of the story. The learners appeared to enjoy communicating in the L2 to sequence the photos in the correct order. The authors felt this was partly due to the content of the pictures, which were set in a local Japanese environment; as a result, the learners could contextualize the content, and this perhaps motivated them to interact in the L2. As the tasks in this study were constructed with a limited budget and time-frame, the authors are confident this task type can be of practical use for teachers in other contexts with limited resources. Ordering and sorting tasks could be designed to fit any particular context by taking photographs of the local environment and creating a picture sequencing story which students can relate to and which will hopefully assist their comprehension and motivation in the task.

In terms of how effective the task-based methodology was in eliciting L2 communication and grammar use within a large class, the authors were again pleased with the study's results as L2 use was observed by the teacher across all groups during the task-cycle. The contributing factor for this appears to be the variation in task design and the methodology used. The fact that each task was different in terms of storyline appeared to promote students' use of the L2. The students were aware that they had to report their group's unique story to the rest of the class in English after they had correctly sequenced the pictures, and this appeared to collectively motivate them to interact in the L2 during the task cycle. The class as a whole was also interested in listening to each group's narration, as each story was different. Consequently, the authors felt that implementing Willis' (1996) framework using ordering and sorting tasks with different storylines resulted in more productive L2 use within a large class, compared to using the same task and storyline.

Furthermore, this study shows how Willis' (1996) framework can be adapted by encouraging the use of specific grammar points at the pre-task stage to ensure that learners use the targeted form during L2 interaction. Ellis (2009) provides an informative account of how TBL can be tailored so that grammar or vocabulary can be attended to at various parts of the lesson, depending on the context. For example, attention to language form can occur at the post-task stage, in the task-cycle, or during the pre-task stage depending on the teacher's preference. In this particular case, the authors were interested in Japanese learners' use of English articles during the task-cycle, hence their instruction towards the form during pre-task planning, which successfully elicited the use of the form during the task.

The implications of this study are limited, however, as only one group's L2 use was recorded and analysed. In addition, the teacher's inability to monitor all of the groups all of the time during the lesson illustrates the management problems that L2 oral interaction will continue to pose with large classes. One solution to this could be to assign roles to particular students to serve as group leaders so they can encourage L2 use within their groups. Nevertheless, the authors hope this study provides some guidelines for minimizing TBL issues relating to task design, L1 use, and large classes. To assist in this process, the guidelines of this study have been summarized in Appendix A to serve as a reference point for teachers who may be interested in designing a task-based lesson to fit their own teaching contexts. There are, of course, other issues related to TBL which this paper does not address which warrant further research, such as how to sequence tasks to develop students' oral language over time.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to investigate whether an oral interactive task could be designed using limited resources and implemented with a large class to promote L2 interaction and grammar use. The results of the study show that ordering and sorting tasks were successfully designed to elicit L2 interaction and use of English articles, and this was achieved with limited financial resources and time. The paper also shows that adapting the storylines of ordering and sorting tasks for different groups of learners and then implementing them through Willis' (1996) framework can help to facilitate L2 use across different groups and minimize some of the classroom management issues for teaching L2 speaking in large classes. It is hoped that findings from this study might encourage other teachers and academics to continue oral pedagogy in this area.

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Appendix

Guidelines for Designing and Implementing a Task-Based Lesson to Promote L2 Interaction and Grammar Use in a Large Class

- **Consider the goals of the curriculum**
Oral communication, speaking, listening, vocabulary communication
- **Select a task-type to meet the goals of the curriculum**
Ordering and sorting: oral interaction through sequencing and categorizing, as well as use of targeted vocabulary
- **Consider the topics of the course and linguistic forms (grammar / vocabulary)**
Topic: money
Linguistic form: English articles
- **Design the task**
Story picture sequence of events about a man who wins the lottery
- **Select / adapt a task-based methodology**
Willis' (1996) framework with attention to language form at the pre- and post-task stages
- **Large or small class size?**
Large: adapt the task storyline per group without affecting complexity