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Tasks in English Language Teaching¹

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In this manuscript, we will provide an overview of various activities that take place in English language classrooms in Japan. More specifically, we will suggest that the introduction of *tasks* to English language classrooms will bring about positive impacts on the development of students' communicative competence in English.

1. This manuscript is based on the lectures given by Sakai at the Comprehensive Education Center on May 30th, 2004. Transcripts of the lectures were then reviewed by Shiokawa, who transformed them into a manuscript with appropriate format and style as a reading material. Urano later made further revisions, and gave a final touch to the manuscript.

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1. What is a task?

1.1 Definition

The word *task* has been used more and more frequently in English language education in Japan. It almost seems that teachers have decided to use this word to call any activity in English language classrooms no matter what it is. However, tasks as we refer to in this manuscript have certain characteristics and are to be distinguished from other types of activities such as drills, exercises, and communication activities.

Let's first look at the definition of a task. If you open books and papers on English language teaching, you will find various definitions of a task. What you see below are some of the typical and widely-accepted definitions in the field.

An activity in which students engage themselves to achieve a particular goal (Muranoi, Chiba, & Hatanaka, 2001, p. 66)

A piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on the meaning rather than form (Nunan, 1989, p. 10)

An activity in which meaning is primary; there is some sort of relationship to the real world; task completion has some priority; and the assessment of task performance is in terms of task outcome (Skehan, 1996, p. 38)

1.2 Comparison with other activity types

How are tasks different from other activities? The following chart describes some of the key differences among activities frequently used in English language classrooms. Among the four activity types, tasks are the most meaning-centered (in fact, their *primary* focus is on meaning unlike the other activities) and are comparable to real-life language use unlike many other activities.

Drill

Drills are mechanical repetitions and pattern practice aiming at "habit formation" of a particular word or expression. A typical example involves the teacher saying "Repeat after me," and the students mimicking him/her like "make, made, made, making" and "cut, cut,

Activities in English Language Teaching (based on Takashima, 2000)

	drill	exercise	communication activity	task
	more form-focused less communicative		↔	more meaning-focused more communicative
primary focus on the language form	+ form	+ form	+ form	- form
focus on the meaning	- meaning	+ meaning	+ meaning + function	+ meaning + function
relevance to a real-life language use	- reality	- reality	+/- reality	+ reality
other characteristics	habit-formation	form-meaning connections	practice of the expression for a communicative purpose	communication

cut, cutting.” Students are trained to respond quickly through drills. Both teachers and students focus almost entirely on the accuracy of the use of the target form, and little, if any, attention is paid to the meaning. For example, students who are trained through drills will say “I’m fine, thank you. And you?” immediately after being asked “How are you?” even if they are not feeling very well. They will also say “I’m a pen. You are a pen. He is a pen. She is a pen.” with no hesitation when they are told to do so (think of the meaning of these sentences!). Nowhere in the real world will students experience a similar situation, and there is a doubt that “habits” formed through drills may not be used appropriately in communication in which attention to the meaning is inevitable.

Exercise

Exercises are similar to drills in that the primary focus is on language form and repetitive pattern practice is involved. The main difference is that some reference to meaning is added in exercises. Let’s look at one of the activities introduced in the manuscript *Reflecting on Our Teaching Practices*, repeated below. In this activity, students make sentences following the model, like “Mt. Iwaki is higher than Mt. Aso.” As you can see, the sentences students produce are required to be accurate both in terms of the form and the meaning. “Mt. Ontake is lower than Mt. Myoko,” for example, is not acceptable because Mt. Ontake is *not* lower than Mt. Myoko. In contrast, the same sentence is considered fine in drills.

Although meaning is involved to some extent in exercises, the primary focus is still on

the form and formation of the habit by repetitive pattern practice. Relevance to a real-life language use is not really considered, and there is no guarantee that students can transfer their “habits” to communication in English.

表を参考にしながら、例にならって high, low を使って高さを比べて言ってみよう。

(例) Mt. Iwaki is higher than Mt. Aso.

Mt. Aso is lower than Mt. Asama.

Mountain	Height
Mt. Ontake	3,067 m
Mt. Myoko	2,454 m
Mt. Asama	2,568 m

Communication activity

Information gap activities are a typical example of communication activities. There is a gap in information that students have, and they need to communicate in order to fill in the gap. There is a clear need for communication in communication activities.

In Japan, communication activities are usually employed to practice certain sentence patterns. For example, in “Higher Mountain (2)” shown in *Reflecting on Our Teaching Practices*, the main purpose was to practice comparatives (e.g., X is higher/lower than Y.) in a communicative setting. In most cases, primary focuses are on the forms rather than the meaning. In other words, there is still a “target” expression or sentence pattern that the teacher expects his/her students to learn in communication activities. Evaluation for students’ performance, therefore, is often measured by the accurate use of the target items in a communicative setting, rather than by the successful completion of the activity.

Task

Tasks are different from communication activities in a few aspects. First, the primary focus of the tasks is on the meaning (or communication), not on the form. In other words, there is no target grammatical item in a task. Student performance is evaluated, therefore, by whether or not they have successfully completed the task, rather than their accurate use of the language. Second, relevance to a real-life language use is considered important when

creating and implementing a task. In a sense tasks are considered as the bridge to link the real-life use of English and students' current knowledge and skills in English. By experiencing tasks with an increasing level of difficulty, students are expected to develop their skills gradually and eventually to be able to use English outside the classroom. In the next section, we will have a closer look at the characteristics of tasks in comparison with other activities described above.

1.3 Characteristics of a good task

A good task in English language classrooms is considered to possess the following characteristics:

- A good task focuses primarily on meaning, not on forms.
- A good task is goal-oriented, and its goal is clearly specified.
- A good task is comparable to a real-life language use (i.e., target task).
- A good task requires target language use.
(i.e., Exchange of information using English is necessary to complete it.)
- A good task allows students to choose what language form to use, not teachers.

We will describe each of them using an example task below. This task uses the same table as in the exercise "Higher Mountain (1)" and in the communication activity "Higher Mountain (2)."

Example Task: Which mountain do you want to climb?

In the next month, your class will have a small excursion trip to climb a mountain. Using the list of the mountains below, discuss in a small group which mountain you want to climb, and choose one.

Mountain	Height
Mt. Ontake	3,067 m
Mt. Myoko	2,454 m
Mt. Asama	2,568 m

Primary focus on meaning, not on forms

A good task focuses primarily on meaning. Meaning is relevant also in other activity types like communication activities and exercises; however, the main focus is on form in those activities, and meaning is “attached” in order to make them more “communicative.” In contrast, a much wider range of functions and meanings can be dealt with in tasks, and therefore a richer context, which is necessary when we aim for a real-life language use, can be incorporated.

In addition, there is no target structure or sentence pattern presented in a task. Students can decide not only what to say but also how to say it, choosing expressions from their own mental resources. For example, if students want to say they don’t want to climb Mt. Asama because it is the highest of the three, they can say:

- I don’t like Mt. Asama. It is higher than the other mountains.
- I don’t want to climb Mt. Asama because it is the highest.
- I don’t like Mt. Asama. It is very high.
- I don’t want to climb a high mountain. So, Mt. Asama is not good.
- Mt. Asama is bad. Too high!

On the contrary, in communication activities like the example “Higher Mountain (2),” students are expected to use comparatives. The only acceptable expressions, therefore, are “Is Mt. X higher/lower than Mt. Y?” Limiting the use of structures would deprive students of opportunities to choose an appropriate form in a given context. In the real-life use of English, there is no target structure or model sentence provided beforehand. The ability to choose appropriate expressions is an important skill for communication, but other activities do not provide an opportunity to develop it.

Goal-oriented

A good task is goal-oriented, and its goal is clearly specified. The goal of the above task is to agree on a mountain to climb among the group members, and it is clearly specified in the instruction. Other examples of goals of a task include “buying T-shirts,” “getting information about apartments on the phone,” and “deciding what to do on weekend.”

Comparable to a real-life language use

A good task is comparable to a real-life language use. More specifically, goals to be

achieved in tasks need to be comparable to those in a real-life situation. In the example task, students will be engaged in thinking and discussing which mountain to climb. How is it comparable to a real-life language use? For example, in the preparation for a school excursion trip to Nara or Kyoto, students are told to decide which temples to visit. We can say what students are supposed to do in the example task is comparable to this.

Requiring target language use

As described above, tasks do not usually have a target sentence pattern or expression, thus students have a choice of what structure to use. This implies that students may also have a choice not to say anything unless we take extra care when creating a task. They can use gestures or draw pictures, for example. In the example task, some students might choose to just say “Mt. Asama? Yes? No?” instead of asking questions in complete sentences. It is therefore desirable that an exchange of information using the target language is realized in the process of completing a task. To avoid gestures or picture drawing, for example, we can change the setting to a telephone conversation rather than a face-to-face communication.

Student control over language use

In the real life use of language, we do not have a set of model expressions or target words when engaged in communication. We have to decide what to say and choose appropriate expressions rather quickly to be successful in (especially oral) communication. In activities like exercises and communication activities, students are always spoon-fed in a sense. All the language materials, words and expressions, are presented before them, and all they have to do is to speak them aloud. As this is far from real-life language use, students will always have difficulty in communicating outside the classroom. Good tasks will provide vital experiences in which students get to choose what language form to use.

1.4 Other reasons why tasks are important

We believe that we have already demonstrated the importance of using tasks in English language teaching. In this section, we would like to discuss a few more reasons to use tasks. Some of the points here overlap with what has already been described.

Increased motivation for language use

Students are more likely to be actively involved in tasks than in other activities as there

is plenty of room for thinking and discussing, which are similar to what they usually do. In the example task, some students might want to get some more information about the mountains before deciding which one to climb. Teachers can then provide additional information, as a reading material, for example, taken from a guidebook or brochure. More simply, teachers can talk about each of the mountains (in English, of course), or can answer questions raised by students. In this way, students will satisfy their interests and at the same time receive more language input, both in listening and reading. In addition, many tasks, including the example task, require peer to peer communication. There are plenty of opportunities to use the language productively. All these language uses can be motivated from one clearly set goal in a task. In a sense, tasks can provide an integrative language learning environment.

Strategies

Communication is not just saying what you want to say and listening to what others say. It often involves people with different and sometimes opposing opinions, and negotiation and persuasion are sometimes necessary for successful communication. Use of appropriate communication strategies is therefore very important in order to maintain communication without a major breakdown. The same applies to students involved in a task. In the example task, it is often the case that members of the same group have different choices of the mountain. Use of communication strategies is therefore inevitable in some tasks, and we can naturally incorporate teaching of communication strategies and other sociolinguistic skills in the tasks. This cannot be done easily with other types of activities.

2. Hands-on practice: Evaluation of activities

To check your understanding of the previous section, let's try to see whether or not the three activities below can be called a task. Take a look at each of them, and use the check list to evaluate them. When you've finished checking, go on to read the next section.

	Activity 1	Activity 2	Activity 3
Primary focus on meaning			
Goal-oriented			
Comparable to a real-life language use			
Requiring target language use.			
Student control over language use			

Activity 1 : ミカについて、ペアになって対話をしよう。1人が()の数字を決め、もう1人が How long ...?を使って尋ねよう。(New Horizon 3, p. 15)

- ミカ
- カナダに在住
 - カナダに()年間住んでいる
 - 英語を()年間勉強している

Activity 2 : 下のA~Dの人名のどれかを()に入れ、正しい内容の文にして言ってみよう。(New Horizon 3, p. 67)

- () is the man who invented the telephone.
 - () is the woman who wrote *The Tales of Genji*.
- A. Edison B. Bell C. Murasakishikibu D. Seishonagon

Activity 3 : チャットをしよう ペアで「知っているタレントなど」についておしゃべりしてみよう。(New Horizon 3, p. 73)

Activity 1

In this pair work, one of the students plays the role of Mika and talks with his/her partner. The student can decide the numbers for the blanks, and his/her partner will ask about the numbers, saying "How long?" First of all, let's see if the primary focus of this activity is on meaning. Some of you might say there are exchanges of meaning in this activity, and others might say there's no real communication. It is true that students have to be able to understand the meaning of, say "Five" or "Ten," in the pair work, but all the other information is provided. In a sense it is more like a translation practice with minimum flexibility. Anyway, the primary focus of this activity is definitely on the form.

Then, is this activity goal-oriented? Far from it. Students only fill in the blanks with arbitrary numbers, translate the sentences, and say them aloud. No real goal is set other than this. Next, is this activity comparable to a real-life language use? We think it is not. First of all, we do not become another person (Mika in this example) and decide our own age arbitrarily. When information used in an activity is not real, it usually loses reality.

How about the last two items on the check list? Needless to say, students have to use

the language to complete this activity because the use of the target language (more specifically, expressions using “How long...”) is its only purpose. And there is no student control over what language form to use because what they are going to say and how to say it are already decided and provided in the form of Japanese sentences.

Activity 2

There is some focus on meaning in Activity 2 because students need to understand the meaning of each sentence in order to solve the problem. However, the primary focus of this activity is on the form (relative pronoun *who*). We can clearly see this because there is no relationship at all between the man who invented the telephone and the woman who authored *The Tales of Genji*. There is no real goal in this activity other than reading sentences aloud, nor is this related to any real-life situation. Target language use is required in a very limited sense in that students have to read the written sentences aloud, and there is no student control over language use. This activity is not at all a task; this is at the level of exercise at most, and some might say it is just a drill.

Activity 3

Activity 3 tells students to have a chat with their partner about a famous person (or other topics). Can this be called a task? First, the primary focus of this activity is on meaning because no target or model expressions are provided. Is it goal-oriented, then? Well, yes in a sense. Having a chat with someone can be a goal in the real-life situation as many of our daily conversations are like that. In this sense, this activity is comparable to a real-life language use. Students obviously have to talk in English in this activity, so target language use is required. And students have a control over language use.

Looking at the check list, we might be able to call Activity 3 a task as it passes all the five criteria. However, we don't think it is a *good* task. How can we make it a better task, then?

One of the weaknesses of this task is a lack of clear goal to be achieved. It is not clear how to see when the goal “to have a chat about a famous person” is achieved. This task will be a better one if the goal is changed to, say, “to learn more about the person sitting next to you by having a conversation.”

There are other ways to make this activity a better task. What changes can you think of?

3. Creating and implementing a task

So far we have looked at the definitions of a task and evaluation criteria for a good task. In this section we will explore steps for creating and implementing a good task for your classes.

3.1 Three steps to create a task

Step 1: Choosing a target task

Remember that a task is a goal-oriented activity that is comparable to a real-life language use. The important first step for making a good task is to choose a good target task for your students. A target task is the task that is done in a real-life situation. Buying a hamburger, soda, and French fries at a hamburger shop in the United States can be a target task if that is relevant to the lives of most of your students, for example. The target task should be realistic in that there is a chance that students might be involved in such a task, whether now or in the near future. It is ideal to conduct a needs analysis of the students before choosing target tasks, but that is often difficult, if not impossible.

Step 2: Observing and describing the target task.

After choosing a target task, you need to observe and describe it because our intuitions about real-life tasks are not always accurate. For example, we have seen lessons on asking and telling directions (to a certain place), a favorite topic for many English language teachers. In many of such activities, students practice to say “Go for X blocks along Y Street/Avenue, and then make a right turn.” But are notions of *blocks* and *streets/avenues* relevant to our lives? Probably not, unless you live in cities like Kyoto and Sapporo, in which there are actually blocks and streets with names. If the target task is to give directions to tourists or visitors to the city you and your students live, it is important to observe how we give directions, in English or in Japanese, in the city. Otherwise the entire activity will lose its comparability to a real-life language use.

Step 3: Designing a pedagogical task

The difficulty level of the target task is usually beyond the current level of your students (otherwise, they have nothing really to learn from it). So the next step is to adjust the difficulty of the task. The task after the adjustment is called a pedagogical task, and this is the task that your students are actually going to try in the classroom.

A pedagogical task needs to be at an appropriate level of difficulty. If it is too difficult, students cannot work on it. If it is too easy, there is nothing students can learn from it. How, then, can we adjust the difficulty of a task? There are mainly two ways.

First, if the difficulty of the task is due to the *linguistic complexity* of the task, you can simplify and elaborate the text (reading and/or listening materials). As it takes another chapter or so to explain how to exactly adjust the linguistic complexity, let us refer to the use of the MERRIER Approach. You are welcome to contact the authors for more information and references.

If you think the difficulty does not come from the linguistic complexity, it is probably due to the *cognitive complexity* of the task. If the target task deals with a difficult topic, students might have a hard time working on it even if they do it in Japanese. One way of adjusting the cognitive complexity is to activate students' background knowledge on the topic. You can also implement similar tasks repeatedly so that students can increase their familiarity with the task type.

3.2 Implementing a task

Now that you have successfully created a pedagogical task, you need to think how to implement it in your classes. We have listed a typical procedure for implementing a task. If you have questions in any of the steps, read this manuscript again since most of them have been covered in some way or another. You are also welcome to contact the authors for questions.

Pre-task activities

- Motivate students to do the task.
- Set specific goals to achieve.
- Activate students' background knowledge.

Task implementation

- Give students instructions.
- Students engage in the task.
- Monitor students' performance, and provide feedback.

Follow-up

- Evaluate students' performance (i.e., whether or not the task has been completed).

- Follow up on students' language use and give feedback if necessary.
- Go back to task implementation if necessary.

4. Summary

In this manuscript, we first introduced the definitions of a task and explained the importance of tasks in English language teaching by comparing tasks with other types of activities. We then described characteristics of a good task and evaluation of tasks by looking at actual examples. Finally, we introduced steps to create and implement a task in the classrooms.

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Appendix: Tasks for senior high school students

On the next page is an example of a task suitable for university-track senior high school students. This task was created based on a textbook story about Ms Sadako Ogata, a former UNHCR. The task was created so that the students could understand the related issues. This is a series of four tasks. The first task is to make a list of findings from the graph. The last task is research and presentation. For the students who have difficulty, models are occasionally presented. Students can understand the textbook more deeply through these tasks. They can also use the expressions in the textbook for their presentation.

This task is made of an entrance examination question (Hokkaido University, 2002). It shows that preparing for entrance examinations and teaching communication do not contradict each other.

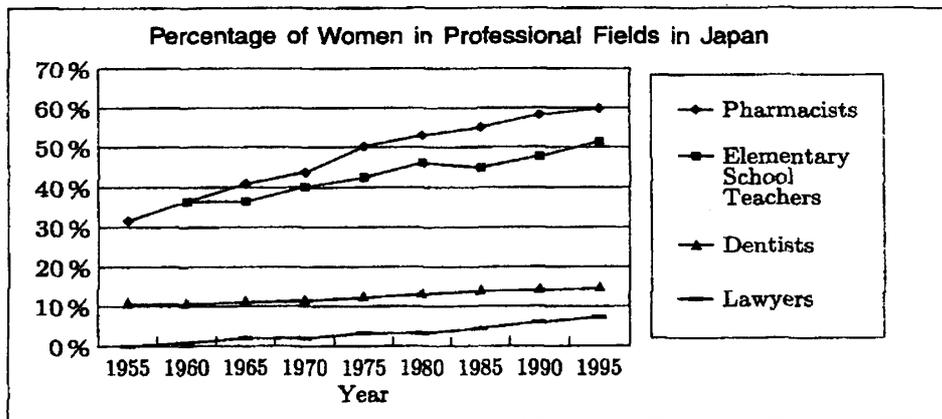
An Example of task in SHS

Research and presentation on women's participation in the society: Group work

In this chapter, you have learned about the life of Ms. Ogata Sadako and are more interested in the issue of women's participation in the society than before. You will see two graphs below. We can learn something about women's participation in Japan from them. Let's see what we can do.

Task 1 Look at Graph 1. What does it show? List up what you can find.

Graph 1.



Based on information from *White Paper on the National Lifestyle: Working Women — The Need for New Social Systems* (1998)

If there is a group which has difficulty in doing this task, the following "hint card" will be given to the group.

Recently the number of women entering professional fields has steadily been increasing. For example, in 1995 there were more women working as pharmacists and elementary school teachers than men. In addition, about 50 years ago there were almost no women lawyers, but in 1995 they made up about 7% of all the lawyers in Japan.

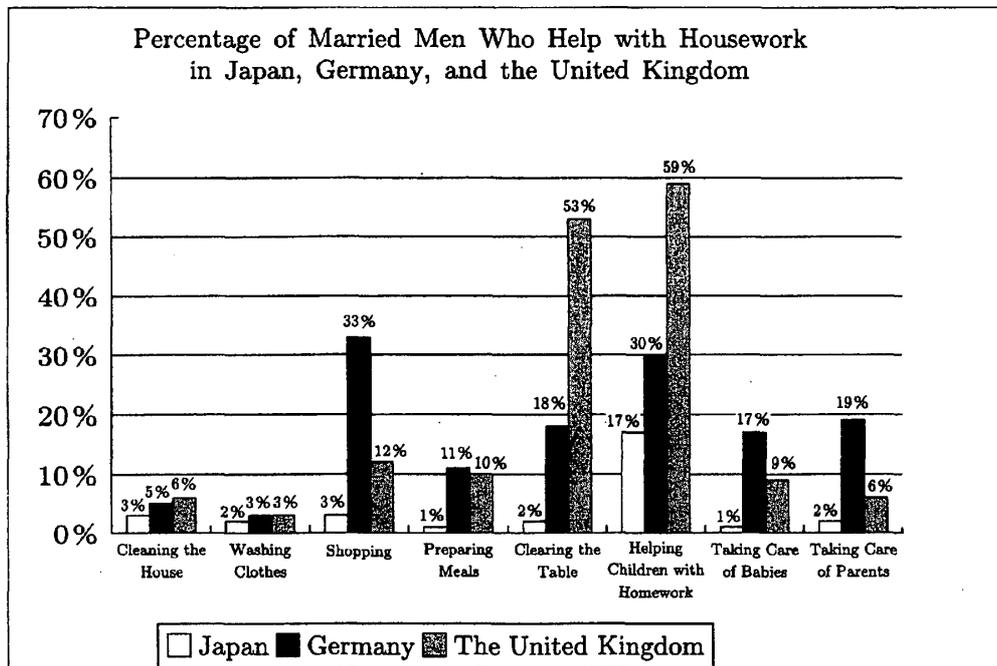
Task 2 Share your findings.

If there is a group which has difficulty in doing this task, the following "hint card" will be given to the group.

We can find two things on Graph 1. One is progress.
 The other thing the graph shows is
 Based on these facts, I think

(タスク3) 次のグラフから読み取れることをプレゼンテーションで発表してください。

Graph 2.



Based on information from *White Paper on the National Lifestyle: Working Women — The Need for New Social Systems* (1998)

(タスク4) タスク1, 2, 3のグラフ、英文資料に関連したリサーチクエストionsを1つ設定し、クラスメートを対象とした調査(調査項目は1つに絞る)を行い、その結果を、次のような構成のプレゼンテーションで発表してください。

Recently we found that ... (タスク1, 2のグラフと英文資料から学んだことを要約して書く).
 Based on this findings, we got further interested in Therefore, we
 conducted a survey. The result was

.....
