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Designing Task-Based Language Activities for the Development of Communication Skills

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Abstract

The challenge in the design of communication lessons for students who are lacking prior communication experience in the target language in and outside the classroom is how to motivate and enhance spontaneous conversation. The instructor should also determine how to reduce their anxiety when facilitating language activities. The present study investigates the primary benefits of introducing communication tasks based on simulation activities into the classroom in order for Japanese students to develop their communication skills for interacting verbally in a variety of social situations. The findings suggest that the task would be beneficial to enhance the students' motivation and improve their communication skills. Student evaluations are also important for successful realization of the task in that they encourage them to consider what and how they have learned and how they can learn the target language more effectively.

1. Introduction

One of the problems of teaching communication skills in Japanese education settings comes from the fact that communication activity often falls short of its potential to motivate meaningful talk. How to remove their psychological anxiety and foster confidence when speaking in the target language is another challenge (Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004). To deal with these problems, pedagogical benefits of developing communication tasks have been widely discussed (Lambert, 2004 ; Murphy, 2003 ; Nunan, 1989). Willis (1996) defines 'task' as 'a goal-oriented activity in which learners use language to achieve a real outcome' such as solving a problem and sharing experiences. Skehan (1996) claims that a task-based approach sees the learning process as learning through doing. Task-based language learning offers a structured approach to learning, and supports the idea that language learning is promoted most effectively when the process closely relates to the students' real-world contexts (Lambert,

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2004). In addition, as Willis (1996) claims, there is an advantage to use task-based approach in that students are given the opportunity to observe the language use and experiment with it as a vehicle for authentic communication. For the purpose of successful completion of tasks for Japanese students, it is important for the instructor to develop communication activities in which the context and the language use are reflected in the real-world contexts and students can be actively involved in the communication activities.

2. Simulation activities

Simulation and drama techniques have an important functional role to play in providing opportunities for students to acquire the target language creatively and communicatively (Elgar, 2002 ; Wes-sels, 1991). Through these activities students are assumed to be able to learn a variety of phrases and language structures by expressing themselves to other students. These activities also provide a way of creating a rich communicative environment (a representation of reality) where students actively become a part of some real-world system and function according to predetermined roles as members of that group (Davis, 1996). Although some features of role-play, in which students are required to perform within a rigid framework, are also found in many simulation activities (Ladousse, 1987), the major benefit of simulation activities is that they “should be possible to replicate the situations in which learners will have to use the language” (Littlejohn, 1990, p.125). These activities are also beneficial in that they increase the students’ motivation and lower their anxiety levels (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982 ; Jones, 1982). However, little research has been conducted so far to explore how to provide students, who lack prior communication experience, with task-based simulation activities in order to develop their communication skills. In this paper, the following two areas are investigated.

1. What are the primary benefits and drawbacks of introducing task-based simulation activities into the classroom in order for students to develop their communication skills?
2. What is the effective instructor’s role during the task?

Answering these questions will help the instructor determine how to integrate communication activities into the language course in a way that maximizes the student’s learning opportunities.

3. The study

3.1. Participants

The present project was implemented in a half-term communication course which students took as one of their elective English classes. The students who participated in this project were a group of seventy-eight Japanese non-English majors in four different classes at a Japanese university. They gained a basic command of English vocabulary and grammar, but only had a few opportunities to practice communicative activities in the secondary school. They were considered to be similar in educational background : all had received their secondary education in Japan.

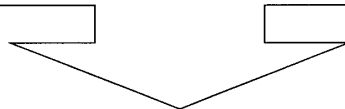
3.2. A task framework

The framework of the present task shown below has been adapted from the framework defined by Willis (1996). The present framework consists of three phases : PRE-TASK, TASK CYCLE, and POST-TASK. The TASK CYCLE is subdivided into three sessions : Task, Planning, and Performance.

The following diagrams show an outline of the task sequence which has been trialed successfully in this project.

PRE-TASK : Introduction to task

- Students are given guidelines outlining the procedure of communication tasks. They include a checklist which reminds them of how they should prepare for the task.
- Students watch a video example in which a group of students engage in a similar task and subsequently learn the relevant vocabulary and expressions.



TASK CYCLE

Task : Identify logical structures

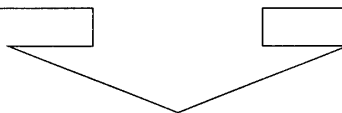
- Conversations, which were cut into pieces, are provided by the instructor and the students have to reorder these mixed language pieces in order to organize them into a coherent and logical structure.
- After finding the correct sequence of the conversations, students in each group discuss the possible direction of the whole conversation and report to one another.

Planning : Organize the content

- Based on the procedure of the previous task, students are given time to share ideas about similar situations that they will face in everyday contexts, and then choose their own topic and sketch out the structure.
- Without a predetermined solution, students are expected to decide whether the rough story they have created is logical and suitable in a real situation.

Performance : Perform interactive communication task

- Students perform simulation activities as a group and use the target language for a wider range of communication purposes. Emphasis is placed on effective communication rather than on correct use of vocabulary and expressions.
- There is genuine negotiation among students in spontaneous manner and students are less in control concerning the level of who should say what and when.

**POST-TASK : Self-assessment**

- Students watch their recorded video for the purpose of evaluating their participation and performance with other students.
- The focus is on how different groups chose different expressions in the similar situations.
- Students watch a video containing a model conversation by native speakers on the related topic in order to compare the difference between the language the students used and that of native speakers, and then write down the useful phrases and expressions.

PRE-TASK : Introduction to task

At the beginning of the PRE-TASK, small mixed-ability groups comprising of four or five students are formed. In this phase, the instructor explores ideas of the tasks with them and, as a lead-in, provides them with as many opportunities as possible to understand the purpose of the tasks.

TASK CYCLE

During the first session in this TASK CYCLE, based on the selected topic 'complaint', each group has different conversational situations. Under the theme of 'complaint', the students previously learned some communication strategies, such as how to make one's complaint in a polite and tactful

way. The content and situations which are dealt with in this session, are adapted to replicate real-life contexts and relevant to the students' previous language experiences. Until the students put the structures in the logical order and realize their solution is acceptable, they continue reconstructing and finding the correct sequence of scenes.

During the planning session, students are required to be imaginative enough to create their own plots and situations collaboratively. Students are encouraged to think, for example, what the most typical complaint in a restaurant might be like, and many ideas are suggested. The instructor circulates to monitor their discussion. There is direct learner involvement in this brainstorming and mind-mapping process and, therefore, students' cognitive engagement is likely to be high.

During the performance stage students perform their simulation activities. The audience is the instructor and the rest of the class. Student performances are videotaped by technical staff so that they can watch it later. The instructor notes down the most frequently occurring mistakes that students make in order to correct them at a later stage as a remedial teaching phase during the self-assessment process described below.

POST-TASK : Self-assessment

In this self-assessment phase, based on the previous phase, with a self-observation sheet (see Appendix A) students examine how well they have done the tasks, what has been successfully acquired, and what needs further work. The exposure to a native speaker's version of the performance provides students with other examples of the similar type of contextual use of language and important language structures that they might require in a real social situation. The instructor's role in this phase is to check how far students could integrate what they have previously learned in the classroom, give feedback on the students' use of the target language and linguistic appropriateness to each group, and makes recommendations for future modifications and improvements. The emphasis here is on appropriacy and accuracy : useful words and phrases best suited to the particular context.

4. Evaluation, analysis, and questionnaire

As the evaluation of tasks, a set of post-course questionnaires were distributed to the students for the purpose of gauging their opinions, attitudes, and perceptions (see Appendix B). The rating scale used in the questionnaire was the 10 point Likert Scale with 1 representing 'strongly disagree' and 10 representing 'highly agree'. In order to attain a mean response for each question, the responses were totaled and averaged. For the purpose of examining any statistically significant differences between

the students' responses, standard deviation was also attained. The data are presented in this paper as mean \pm SD. In addition, the questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions was carried out to clarify students' individual comments on the possible benefits and problems of the tasks they had completed and their thoughts and feelings concerning their use of the task sequences.

5. Findings

In spite of the fact that most students had extremely limited previous experience of communication activities, the results indicated that the majority of students felt the tasks were valuable and they would like to do more tasks similar to the ones they had performed. Average (\pm SD) of this response was 8.37 (\pm 1.66). Also, students highly valued the theme used in the tasks as being useful and enjoyable means of acquiring communication skills. Some comments from students included as follows.

The tasks provided us with valuable opportunities to become more engaged in our communicative language learning.

We were able to learn language more communicatively and spontaneously with the present tasks than learning other activities in the regular classroom.

In addition, somewhat surprisingly almost all were in favor of the tasks because they felt the tasks helped them improve not only speaking and listening skills but also reading and lexical skills. Average (\pm SD) of this response was 8.17 (\pm 1.57). There were not so many students who felt they couldn't acquire correct expressions through the tasks. Average (\pm SD) of this response was 4.35 (\pm 2.22). On the other hand, some students felt it difficult to create coherent and logical structure of conversations. Average (\pm SD) of this response was 5.39 (\pm 2.41). Also, the comments from the students indicated that even less advanced students felt that they would benefit from the help of their more advanced peers.

Although my English level is not high, people in the same group helped me sustain the challenge to communicate spontaneously.

The dynamics of the collaborative activities also had a great influence on the successful completion of the present task.

6. Discussion of findings

6.1. Benefits

Based on the results, it can be asserted that, as McArthur (1983) claims, the present approach

motivated students and encouraged them to develop fluency in the use of the target language. There was students' strong willingness to express themselves at their own level and use their own choices and decisions based on their own previous language experiences. It is also important to note that a high level of student involvement in the process of TASK CYCLE, in which they contributed to creating the materials which they had prepared for their own task, developed their confidence in maintaining the smooth flow of conversations. This problem-solving process may be beneficial to bringing linguistic and attitudinal rewards. As noted earlier, the present task has the advantage of supporting those who are not good at communication skills. Students with different language abilities can all benefit from these activities.

Another important implication of this study is that the task also gave an advantage to the instructor in that monitoring progress of students' language learning helped understand their logical operation in spoken communication. The function of PRE-TASK was to encourage students to rehearse language they had already encountered in familiar situations or contexts. The task provided valuable feedback on whether the students had acquired the target expressions. Teachers should be closely involved in the selection and production of materials which suit the students' proficiency levels. As Sheerin (1989, p.7) claims, this task is one of the most practical solutions to "many language teaching problems, such as mixed-ability classes and students with different backgrounds and needs." This kind of activity can integrate easily into any language classroom with other components of language learning.

6.2. Drawbacks

As for the drawbacks, the task, which required students to arrange the flow of the conversation in the logical order, was challenging for some students. However, the process of their preparation in the TASK CYCLE was linguistically valuable and the activities produced a good range of students' language abilities. By experimenting with new vocabulary and structures, students were likely to take more responsibility for organizing their stories about real social situations, which promoted questions and discussion among students. Another drawback is that, because of some students' inadequate linguistic competence and misuse of words and expressions, misunderstanding and communication breakdown among the students often occurred. However, gaining a better understanding of the language by asking questions, such as "What are the words and phrases that caused misunderstanding?" and "Are there any expressions which could have been used differently?", is valuable, because students' motivation to communicate depends less on linguistic competence than on willingness to engage in the performance. In order to solve both of these problems, assessment is an integral part of

the students' learning process. Also, the instructor's role is crucial for the successful completion of tasks. For less experienced students, more linguistic support is indispensable in the POST-TASK phase. At a later stage, the phrases and expressions the students wrote down may become their learning materials for their own study. This approach improves their linguistic knowledge and enhances their language learning experience.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to provide a methodological approach which is learner-centered task-based activities to enhance students' motivation and develop their communication skills. The results suggest that the present task sequence activated a great deal of language and stimulated interaction communicatively and spontaneously. Also, it helped students consciously focus on their own contribution to learning and promoted their attention to language form. Although the present study focuses on English language teaching, this technique is also applicable to the development of communication skills in any language for students of all language levels.

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Appendix A Self-Observation Sheet

Mark each of the following statements concerning evaluation on a scale from Excellent to Poor.

Poor 1—2—3—4—5 Excellent

- (1) Students demonstrate correct pronunciation.
- (2) Students demonstrate adequate tone and volume.
- (3) The content provides precise and accurate information.
- (4) Students use a wide variety of words and expressions.
- (5) The content is organized into a logical sequence.
- (6) The story line is clear and easy to understand.

Appendix B Task Evaluation Questionnaire

Rate the following statements according to the scale and write the number in the brackets.

Strongly disagree 1—2—3—4—5—6—7—8—9—10 Highly agree

- (1) The tasks were quite effective in developing communication skills. []
- (2) The theme of the tasks was interesting and important for me. []
- (3) The tasks were valuable for me and I would like to do more tasks like this one in another occasion. []
- (4) The tasks helped me understand and appreciate the correct phrases and words used in a particular social context. []
- (5) The tasks helped me improve a variety of language skills. []
- (6) The tasks helped me improve my reading skills. []
- (7) The tasks helped me improve my listening skills. []
- (8) The tasks helped me improve my writing skills. []
- (9) The tasks helped me improve my speaking skills. []
- (10) The tasks helped me improve my lexical skills. []
- (11) I think it difficult to acquire appropriate English expressions through the completion of the tasks. []
- (12) It seems to be very difficult to create the flow of conversations logically. []