

<Study Notes>

## Task-based Learning in Junior High School Classes

Shirley LEANE

### Introduction

In December 2013, I attended the All Japan Inter-Middle School English Oratorical Contest in Tokyo. Princess Takamado, guest of honor at the post-contest reception in the Imperial Hotel, first praised the participating students for their excellent English ability and then reminded the teachers that the students in the contest are among the top 1% in Japan. She said that when she talks with other students most of them tell her they dislike English. The princess then exhorted teachers not to forget the 99% of students who dislike English. Her main message was that a teacher's most important duty is to have lessons which students can enjoy.

Many language-teaching professionals agree with the princess's words: it is the teacher's responsibility to plan interesting lessons which motivate students to study. Ellis (2005) wrote, "teachers...need to accept that it is their responsibility to ensure that their students are motivated and stay motivated and not bewail the fact that students do not bring any motivation to learn the L2 [second language] to the classroom" (p. 11). Another very well known researcher, Dornyei (2001a) said, "the best motivational intervention is simply to improve the quality of our teaching" (p. 26).

Unfortunately, in many classrooms, in both universities and schools, the only time students get a chance to speak is when they are asked to practice formulaic sentences from the textbook. They never get a chance to produce their own language. But, when asked, most students say their aim is to be able to communicate in English, to be able to speak and be understood, and to understand what is being said to them. The students are saying they want to use, not just comprehend, the new language. If students are going to achieve this goal, they need a) a language rich environment and b) genuine communication in the language classroom.

In this paper, I will first look at some of the pitfalls of traditional language teaching, next I will give a brief explanation of task-based learning, and finally I will discuss my experiences of using tasks in junior high school English classes: all with the over-riding aim of having lessons which students can enjoy.

### **1. 'Traditional' teaching and language exercises**

Practicing formulaic sentences or grammar points is not language use. Students best learn a language by using it - to communicate (Long, 2011, p. 380). I learnt this very quickly when I first came to Japan. I often overheard my students consistently making the same grammar mistake, so I devoted part of a lesson to teaching that particular grammar point. I gave them a grammar test the following week and all but one student got 100% for the test. I was naturally very pleased with myself. But, to my dismay, the next time the class did an activity that required that grammar I heard exactly the same mistake! As Larsen-Freeman (2003) says, "Students can recall the grammar rules when they are asked to do so but will not use them spontaneously in communication" (p. 8). Students need practice *using* the language. Then they will be able to learn it.

I am not discounting the value of specific study of vocabulary and sentence structure though. Vocabulary and grammar exercises are stepping-stones to language use and language learning; they support the students' language learning. They are a valuable and essential part of language learning (Larsen-Freeman, 2003, p. 90).

Nunan (2012) believes "it is generally accepted that language is more than a set of grammatical rules, with attendant sets of vocabulary, to be memorized.... Learning is no longer seen simply as a process of habit formation" (pp. 6-7). When learners are given opportunities to use their own language for real communication, rather than merely repeating a textbook example, their language skills will be stretched as they try to make themselves understood (Willis & Willis, 2007, p. 4). In doing this, they will experiment with language, they may rephrase what they just said or they may try new sentence structures that they have not used before, and they will definitely be more motivated to learn. "Few students sustain their enthusiasm for learning when the lesson focuses on the parts of language" (Larsen-Freeman, 2003, p. 7). Tasks that appeal to students' "imagination and creativity" (Vale et al., 1991, p. 30) are a much more effective way to learn a new language.

### **2. Task-based learning**

Classroom activities or tasks, which involve learners in conversational interactions, in groups or pairs, can improve their fluency and give them skills in managing conversations in the new language. Tasks force students to use their own language skills because it is impossible to predict which phrases or vocabulary they will need to complete the activity. The language required is dependent on what their partner says or does. Two examples of tasks suitable for

first grade junior high students are: interviewing classmates about their favorite music, or making a set of domino cards that are based on sports. These tasks are not easy for first grade students; they push the students to experiment with English, which is essential for language learning. Students learn best when they are exposed to a wide range of interesting activities. Obviously the students will be more motivated if the lesson is interesting, and research carried out by Dornyei (2001b, p. 151) found that the course book is one of the most demotivating factors in a classroom.

One of teachers' most important tasks in providing communicative data that are comprehensible, relevant, and at the same time challenging to learners is to create in the classroom the kind of conditions where learners come to regard use of the target language as a natural and regular occurrence. Learners will learn best in an environment where they are surrounded by a range and variety of spoken and written language. (Vale et al., 1991, p. 29)

Yashima (2004) stated, "to have self-confidence in communication in an L2 is crucial for a person to be willing to communicate in that L2" (p. 151). Part of this willingness to communicate comes from the classroom atmosphere. If students feel secure and comfortable, knowing they will not be criticized, they will be more confident to take risks, experiment with language and make mistakes. If the student's language ability is going to improve, it is essential that they experiment with English and understand that experimentation always involves the risk of making mistakes.

### **3. My experiences with junior high students**

Many teachers think students need lots of vocabulary and model sentence input before attempting to speak. I have found that junior high students can do, and are very enthusiastic about, communicative tasks that are tailored to their language ability. They can convey a surprising amount of information once they know a few simple phrases such as, "What is this/that?" "This/that is \_\_\_", "I like \_\_\_", "I don't like \_\_\_", "Do you like \_\_\_" and "I don't understand \_\_\_."

Rousseau, an eighteenth century philosopher and educator, claimed: "if [learners] never made mistakes, [they] would never learn properly.... Whatever he knows, he should know not because you have told him, but because he has grasped it himself" (Boyd 1956). Rousseau was writing about general education, but his ideas are equally applicable to language classrooms.

### **3.1. My teaching principles**

My overriding goal is to build students' confidence and equip them with comprehensive communication skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking, not only for use in the classrooms but also outside. This goal is the same regardless of the level, whether it is junior high school or university. In order to achieve this goal, I have four main principles:

- ***English immersion***

All instructions, for all grades, are given in English and students are encouraged to talk in English as much as possible. This helps to build natural confidence in communicating in English.

- ***Original lesson materials which I devise myself***

This helps to maximize learning at each grade level to meet the specific needs of students. While the school's ultimate aim of my classes is to enhance students' output (speaking and writing skills), it is necessary to provide high-quality input (reading and listening), to stimulate their learning. In order to do so, I select and prepare my own materials, which are appropriate for the students' English level and interests.

- ***Topic-based, rather than grammar-based approach***

This enables natural recycling of vocabulary, and is an effective way to increase students' working vocabulary.

- ***Student-centred approach***

Topics which are interesting for the students, such as music and sports, are selected to heighten their motivation to learn. The time students communicate with each other in English is maximized in class. This helps to build confidence and communication skills in English.

### **3.2. My aims for each grade**

***First grade:***

Build basic confidence and skills in communicating in English by using all four skills; speaking (e.g. to recognize stress and intonation in English), listening (e.g. to understand classroom instructions), reading (e.g. to comprehend short texts without translating) and writing (e.g. to write legibly), through specially designed activities such as conducting a short survey and interviewing classmates, and creating a poster about themselves.

***Second grade:***

Build further confidence and skills in communication, including short (3 or 4 sentences) paragraph writing, expressing their ideas verbally and in writing, and using their imagination in English communication.

***Third grade:***

Develop communication skills at a higher level including writing longer paragraphs (80-100 words), expressing ideas about their study, reading and commenting on classmates' writing, making informative posters about Tokyo or Okinawa, or using their imagination to write about topics such as 'My dream school' or 'If I had a magic wand.'

My main aim is to help students' *knowledge* of English develop into *competence*, so they can actually use the language as a practical tool of communication. I also have a strong interest in student motivation and it dismays me when I constantly hear teachers complaining about Japanese students' low motivation for learning. For example, in a Japan Times opinion article Clark (2009) complained:

Despite six years of middle and high school study, many Japanese are still unable to speak English well.... ask any foreign national teaching English in Japan and he/she will say the main problem is not curricula but the lack of student motivation. (Clark, 2009, para. 8)

As already mentioned in this paper, I strongly believe it is the teacher's responsibility to motivate students and I strive to maintain a high level of learner motivation in my classes. Thus I consider it important to promote student enjoyment of learning; keeping them interested in the lesson, and building the social atmosphere in the class so they feel comfortable to communicate with each other in their new language.

In my classes, students are constantly interacting with each other in English. Many of the tasks involve pair work. During each lesson, I ask students to change partners so they have opportunities to recycle and improve the language they are using for the task. The improvement is noticeable with their second partner, and by the third partner there is a marked increase in both their fluency and their confidence in completing the task.

**3.3. Classroom observations of task-based learning**

Junior high students do have the ability to conduct class surveys if they are given time to plan and write their answers first. They can easily answer questions such as:

- What do you like best about [school name]?
- What is your favorite place at school?

They are also quite capable of writing extra questions of their own to make the survey more individual. Initially, the first grade students take a long time to write the extra questions and they often ask each other for help, but the final interviews for the surveys are conducted in English. These questions give them an opportunity to find out more about their classmates and they genuinely seem to enjoy the interaction. The sentences they write for themselves in the beginning are often not grammatically correct but they always seem to understand each other and are quick to learn strategies to communicate with each other in English. I continue to use survey forms and by the time they are in second grade, students are confident in their ability to use and understand English.

I usually use small groups or pair work to encourage greater individual participation and reduce the threat students feel when speaking to the whole class. After the small group discussions students are often curious to know the opinions of other groups and because of this they are quite comfortable choosing one member to stand and report their decisions to the whole class. Students are comfortable making mistakes within a small group, but they know that speaking to the whole class demands a higher level of accuracy, making it a valuable experience for their language development.

One important point I have learnt over the years is that tasks should be interesting, but not too interesting. If they are too interesting students will immediately slip into using their first language because they do not have the patience to struggle with English. For example, in 2011, at the height of Biebermania, as part of a survey about music tastes I included a sample question “Do you like Justin Bieber?” Answering the question with a simple “Yes” was absolutely not sufficient for many students because what they really wanted to say was how much they loved and adored the singer, how they felt when they listened to his music, and how many of his CDs they had purchased. They did not have the language skills to do this in English so many of them immediately switched to speaking Japanese.

### **3.4. Conclusion**

In teacher-centred classrooms, where the learners are practicing formulaic sentences, very little real communication takes place. Student-talk in these classrooms has no resemblance to real-life communication outside the classroom. Nunan (2012) makes a distinction “between ‘knowing that’ and ‘knowing how’...that is, between knowing and being able to regurgitate sets of grammatical rules, and being able to deploy this grammatical knowledge to communicate effectively” (p. 7).

Many university students, even those who have achieved high scores in the entrance exams, still do not have confidence in their ability to communicate in English. They know have the ability to create grammatically correct sentences but, as the students themselves are well aware, this does not give them the ability to carry out real-world tasks in English. Their lack of ability to communicate in English does not correlate with their knowledge of grammar. The challenge facing teachers is how to encourage the students to use the language they have studied, and ideally this starts in junior high school.

Shirley LEANE (Education Center, Tottori University)

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