LANGUAGE LEARNING THROUGH TASK AND ACTIVITIES

Meisuri
Institut Agama Islam (IAIN) Raden Intan Lampung
meisurie@yahoo.com

Abstract

There is a good deal of variation among experts on how defining "task". According to Cameron, task is defined as classroom activities and an activity that can be any kind of event that children/ students participate in. Furthermore, she added that a classroom task will have clear beginning and end: it may be quite short or it may last over several lessons. For the students, a classroom task should have a clear purpose and meaning; for the teacher, the task should have a clear language learning goals.

Key words: language learning, task and activities

Task may also be defined as "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 meaning rather than form" (Nunan in Rod Ellis, 2006). This definition is suitable to the issues of language learning in academic settings. Additionally, tasks will be seen as "complex and lengthy activities" (Breen 1987:23 in Giyoto 2007). Effective communication is best achieved by engaging learners in performing tasks. That is, learners can develop their communicative competence (including linguistics competence through performing tasks (Ellis, 2006).

Brown (2002), formulates the concept of task that seems to capture the essentials. He defines task as an activity in which:

- Meaning is primary

- There is some communication problem to solve

- There is some sort of relationship to comparable real world activities.

- Task completion has some priority

- The assessment of the task is in term of outcome.

To promote maximum student learning, there are many qualities of tasks that need to be considered by the teachers. The focus is on qualities that are likely to affect students' beliefs about their competencies and their expectations for success. The following are some consideration for the teacher in designing any task for the students.

1. **Make sure the task is clear.** The students must know what they are expected to do and where they can find the resources and materials they need to complete tasks. It is also essential to tet them know when they will have to work, and how much time they must devote to the task, and when the task need to be completed.

2. **Give tasks that are challenging but achievable for *all* students.** Tasks of intermediate difficulty, those that allow students to experience improvement in their skills, are most effective in producing feelings of competence. It means the teacher needs to avoid easy task or difficult task. Furthermore, to make the tasks are challenging but achievable for all students can be done by following points:

   a. Vary the difficulty of tasks among students according to their skill levels. Providing tasks that are appropriately challenging for every student in a group of students whose skills vary requires individualizing the complexity of the tasks. Teachers are sometimes reluctant to vary tasks because they are concerned that students will feel embarrassed about doing assignments that are easier than those completed by their peers. To the contrary, completing assignments and being able to take personal responsibility for success are far more likely to encourage self-confidence than repeatedly failing to do the more difficult tasks that classmates are given. Moreover, all students can take pride in their success if the teacher creates a climate in which hard work and success are rewarded at whatever level each student is working.

   b. Give tasks that can be completed at different levels. Teachers can vary the difficulty of the task, in part, by providing tasks that can be completed at different levels and by conveying different expectations. The

point is that the students understand that they are expected to complete the task at a level that requires real effort and persistence and will thus help them develop their skills. Differential expectations can be conveyed by guiding students' choices (e.g., of the book selected to report on), and by making direct statements and evaluation ("This is technically correct, but you could have made a more compelling argument").

c. Make sure that the highest achievers are challenged. Teachers need to prepare in challenging the high-achieving students to deal with the difficulties they will inevitably encounter in future educational contexts and in life.

3. Organize assignments to provide frequent opportunities for students to see their skill level increase. In order to create moderately challenging, tasks need to provide opportunities for regular feedback which indicates improvement in skill or understanding. In organizing assignments to provide frequent opportunities for students to see their skill level increase can be done as following:

a. Order problems and assignments by difficulty level to provide students with a sense of increasing mastery.

b. Break down difficult tasks into subunits to emphasize that students receive positive competence feedback before they become discouraged or concerned about the direction in which they are headed because ome children may need smaller units and more frequent positive feedback than others. (http://www.education.com/reference/article/effective-classroom-practice-tasks/)

However, it is useful to distinguish between task and activities which are frequently used as if they were interchangeable. Task need to be supported by a previous focus on language forms, skills, and strategies developed through activities. Activities prepare students for the language and thinking demand of a task by providing different kind of support (Brewster and Girald, 2003). In brief, the characteristics of activities as follows: Focus on language practice,

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Cognitively simple, Not always personalized according to pupil's interests, not a meaningful end in themselves, provide a small degree of pupil freedom and choice, Provide controlled and guided practice, Rehearse specific language items, skills or strategies and Support the linguistics and cognitive demands of task in structured way.

One of the the possibility occurs in the classroom is that when capable students won't finish simple task, even worse, won't even attempt task/assignments that appear to be even slightly challenging. Students who stop working at the first moment of perceived difficulty are even more perplexing because their lack of persistence is often confused with laziness. While it may be tempting to just advise students to keep trying, this advice seldom resolves the problem.

There are many reasons for the unwaveringly feeble effort that many students present at the first sign of a challenge. For many students, the fear of their work not being "good enough" is paralyzing. Rather than earn a failing grade from a teacher, they give it to themselves by just not doing the work.

Other students are so accustomed to overly helpful adults who respond to their learned helplessness with so many hints and clues that they do not really have to think for themselves. Unfortunately, this pattern of behavior is all too recognizable. These are the students who ask others for the page number rather than check a table of contents, ask dozens of anxious questions rather than read the text for information, of who put their heads down on their desks rather than work independently for any length of time.

Whatever the reason, it is possible to mitigate the patterns of learned helplessness. Below is a list of strategies that the teacher can use to help the students develop into persistent and confident learners.

1. Start a unit of study by activating prior knowledge. Students who can connect new learning with previous knowledge will be far more likely to persist in facing learning challenges than those students for whom each concept in the material is unfamiliar.

2. Begin a unit of study or even smaller assignments within that unit with work that easier than it will be near the end of the unit or assignment. Once students see that they can do the work, they will be less intimidated.

3. Break longer assignments into smaller, more manageable ones so that students won't be overwhelmed at the thought of a long task.

4. When students work in pairs or triads on even part of an assignment, they tend to do well. Working with a study buddy allows instant support when students are not sure of an answer or a procedure.

5. Nothing succeeds like success. Design activities where your students can shine, and they will want to continue the positive feelings generated by that success. Use differentiation techniques to reach as many learners as you can.

6. Help students see the connection between effort and success. Often less persistent students believe that good students somehow are just smarter or find the work easier than they do. Learning that everyone needs to work hard at times can be an epiphany for some students.

7. Teach students how to accurately estimate the time that it may take them to complete a task. Students who think that it will take them hours and hours to do their homework will be far more prone to quit than those students who realize that a shorter time commitment is required.

8. Offer plenty of rubrics, models, samples, and demonstrations so that students know when they are on the right track.

9. Have students set reasonable goals and work to achieve them. When students work to achieve a personal goal, they have a vested interest in working.

10. When you see students struggling with an assignment, use one of the most powerful questions in your teacher's toolbox: ask, "How can I help you?"

11. All learning should have a clear and pragmatic purpose. Students who know why they have to complete an assignment will be more willing to do so if they know how it will benefit them now and in the future.

12. Have students write their questions during independent work in a certain area of the board or on the Smartboard. Answer these questions at predictable intervals.

13. Formative assessments serve a dual purpose. They not only let you know what your students do and do not know, but they can be useful tools in making sure that your students know exactly how to proceed to be successful. Frequent small formative assessments can be very useful tools in helping students stay on track.

14. Teach your students that their work does not always have to be perfect to be acceptable. Sometimes "good enough" is really good enough.

15. Harness the power of peer pressure. Having students work together in a class challenge to reach a specific goal can encourage those students who are willing to shortchange themselves, but who don't want to let their classmates down.

16. Many teachers find that stopping periodically and having peers make brief checks of each others' work can help students stay on the right track.

17. School success is not a big, flashy event. Rather, academic success lies in a pattern of small accomplishments. Work with your students to help them internalize this idea though brief class discussions, reflections, and other shared conversations.

18. Some students benefit from seeing a visual representation of the sequence of assignments that they are required to do. A bar graph or chart with spaces to be

filled in as students complete the various steps of a unit of study will make it easier for students to persist until they complete the big task.

19. Frequent praise and even more frequent encouragement will keep students on task far longer than brusque corrections will.

20. Careful and close monitoring of students as they work will allow you to catch problems when they are manageable. Small problems are not roadblocks to confidence building—big problems are, though.

21. Encourage students who are working independently to signal that they are having a problem and then to keep working until help arrives. Some teachers offer a desk sign that is red on one side to signal for help and green on another to signal that they are on the right track.

22. Some teachers do not answer oral questions when students are working independently except at set intervals. Used correctly, this technique encourages students to keep working because they know that their questions will be answered at a predictable time.

23. Offer students time to reflect at the end of a lesson. Have them write responses first and then encourage them to share what went right and what caused stress during an assignment. Sharing the results of their metacognition can be a powerful way for students to learn how other students overcome their learning problems.

24. Often older students who have mastered the material current students may find difficult can be helpful resources. They can offer quick, informal advice and encouragement from a student's point of view.

25. Providing opportunities for students to look back on how far they have come in their learning—to review their past success—allows students to see the big picture of what they have already accomplished and encourages them to continue.

26. Be sure to offer a sufficient amount of appropriate practice before moving on to the next topic of study.

27. Offer a variety of different activities to review material. At the end of each class, when you provide a quick review of the day's lesson, use a variety of different activities that appeal to the various learning styles among your students.

28. Work with your students to focus on their strengths. Once they know what they are doing right, what individual study techniques work well for them, then students will be able to use those techniques and strengths to work quickly and efficiently. (**http://teaching.monster.com/benefits/articles/10348-28-ways-to-build-persistent-confident-students**).

The following are activities that any language learner can use as part of thier language learning program. They are divided into three catagories though with a little work they can be adapted to cross into other catagories.

- **Personal Setting:** This is when you are studying alone.
- **Lesson Setting:** These are for use with a native speaker during a lesson time.
- **Community Setting:** These are to be used out in the community among native speakers.

A. *The following are the examples of PERSONAL SETTING*

1. **Children's Books**: Children's books are written with a narrower vocabulary and are usually supported with pictures, both of which help aid comprehension.
2. **Google Translate**: Finding resources like *Dora the Explorer* in the target language is usually the challenge. With Google Translate and Youtube though, you can find just about anything. Type: Watch Dora the Explorer into Google Translate and then copy the translated phrase into the Youtube search bar. You can use Google Translate to search for tons of things in

this way. A few to consider: clothing catalogue, children's stories, world news, or the name of your favorite hobby.

3. **Passion Podcasts or Blogs**: Using Google Translate, find podcasts or blogs about the things you are passionate about. If you are a Man United fanatic, find blogs and podcasts about Man United in the target language. What's your passion? Harley Davidson? Fly Fishing? Star Trek? Apple Computers? George Cloony? Internet Marketing? Find a blog or podcast created by a native speaker about that topic.

4. **Comic Books**: Comic books use the pictures to tell half the story, giving you a tremendous amount of background knowledge. The reading is mostly just the dialogue between characters. A comic book or graphic novel can be a great source of comprehensible input.

5. **Dubbed Movies**: Finding your favorite movie dubbed into the language you are learning can be an excellent source of comprehensible input. Your interest is high, you have great amount of background knowledge and you can watch scenes or the whole movie again and again.

6. **Narrow Reading**: Rather than skipping around and reading about a lot of different subjects, reading a variety of different texts about the same subject builds background knowledge and creates more comprehensible input. As an example you may read four different newspaper articles about the same current event. Each author writes from their own point of view, but each uses the same set of words and structures.   This could also be expanded to other activities: watching movies, listening to podcasts and listening to other native speakers – all about the same topic.

7. **Streamed TV Series**: Most languages can be found online. Most as well have a television series or two being streamed over the Internet. A TV series, like narrow reading, allows you to get to know the characters and storyline so that you can begin to understand more and more of what is going on in the story. Check out language specific blogs for ideas on where to find these or check in at one of the language learning forums.

8. **Books in a Series**: Reading a series (Narnia or Harry Potter for example) is another great way to create comprehensible input. A great deal of

background knowledge, vocabulary and the writer's style carries over from one book to the next. For example, as I have read through the Harry Potter series, there was a larger percentage of words that I knew in book 2 that had carried over from book 1. This allowed my mind to get integrated review of what I already knew while being able to focus on the new stuff that was coming up.

9. **Label Up**: We have probably all at one time or another labeled the things in our home with the new language. This is great, but we can increase the amount of comprehensible input available by expanding this labeling to include statements about what the object does, or what we do to it. For example if you label the door, why not also write a few sentences below the word: I open the door. I close the door. I knock on the door. This will give you more interaction with more of the language.

10. **Repeat – reread, re-watch, re-listen**: Don't be afraid to read the same book twice or watch a movie four times in a row. With each pass through, you will understand more, allowing your brain to make more and deeper connections of meaning with the words and structures you are seeing.

11. **Flaschcards**: The use of traditional or computer based flashcards is a great way to get a lot of repetition of the words you are learning. But use them effectively and efficiently.

12. **Instructional Texts**: A simple grammar book or instructional text can be a great resource and provide high quality activities for language learners. A series like the [Teach Yourself](#) series is a great place to start..

B. Some examples of LESSON SETTING are as follows:

1. **Pronunciation Practice**: There is much you can do to improve your pronunciation in the target language. Your goal need not be to sound unmistakably native, but you should strive not to sound harsh to the native speaker's ear..

2. **Catalogues**: Home Furnishing catalogues like the ones IKEA gives away can be a great resource to use with a native speaker. You can do a lot of great activities that provide really great comprehensible input with them. .

3. **Total Physical Response**: Total Physical Response is a classroom activity that language teachers have been using for some time. It is time tested and proven to really work. The challenge is to turn it around so that you the learner can direct what is going on while still receiving the great input. A good game of Simon Says may be a good place to start..

4. **Handcrafted Stories**: Handcrafted stories are stories that you have written. After you correct them with a native speaking friend, they become a great source of comprehensible input because they are interesting and filled with background knowledge (you wrote them after all). And since you wrote them, they are at your level. Perfect! Record your native speaking friend reading them, put them on your ipod and now you have an amazing source of comprehensible input that you can add to your personal study time..

5. **Road Map**: On a large poster board, draw a map of your town with some of the main landmarks. Borrow one of your son's matchbox cars (optional). Now sit down with a native speaker and have him tell you how to get to one place or another as if you are the taxi driver. This is a great way to get a lot of input and also really get a lot of practice at understanding directions.

6. **Story Telling**: Have your native speaking friend or language helper tell you a common story that you both know. Thinks of childhood stories, folktales, etc. You could also give them a bunch of props and have them use the props to make up and tell a story. .

7. **Re-tell**: Have a friend or language helper re-tell something that you both saw. Last night's football match. A TV show or movie. It has to be something that you watched as well. This will give you the background knowledge that will help create comprehensible input.

8. **Speak to a Topic**: Choose a common topic and have your native speaking friend talk about it for a few minutes. Have them tell you about their family, their favorite team, their favorite food, etc.

9. **Sentence Expansion Drill**: The basic idea with this drill is to begin with a simple sentence and expand it one structure at a time. This allows you to get a great deal of practice with a language helper or alone..

10. **Sentence Transformation Drill**: The basic idea here is to start with a sentence and then choose one part (usually the verb) and transform it by changing the verb. This allows you to practice all the different grammar forms.

11. **Series Method**: The series method is a good way to move into working with connected speech and to give yourself a great deal of comprehensible input with the foundational elements of any language. .

12. **Read Aloud**: Reading aloud with a language helper is a great way to give your tongue lots of practice in producing the new sounds and rhythms of the language in a low pressure environment. .

C. The examples of COMMUNITY SETTING are as follows:

1. **The Grand Tour Question**: The grand tour question is asked about a specific personal narrative of a person's life. Example Questions about the past will give you answers using the past forms of grammar, questions about the future will give you future forms. The key to creating comprehensible input is to ask multiple people the same question. Each will give you their own story about the same topic. Grammar forms and much of the vocabulary will be repeated. Asking this question to four or five people in the same week and by the the time you are listening to the last one, your comprehension will have improved significantly. If it's possible, record these narratives for later listening.

2. **Dumb/Smart Questions**: One of my favorites, the Dumb/Smart question is dumb because you already know the answer to the question you are going to ask and it's smart because this background knowledge gives you a much greater chance of understanding what the person says and thus, receiving comprehensible input.

3. **Take Control**: One of the best things you can do in the community setting to ensure you receive comprehensible input is to take control of the

conversations. You can do this with some of the ideas above, but you can also do this by just asking people to slow down, or repeat things or to give examples.

4. **Help them Help you**: In general, people aren't all that good at giving comprehensible input. Usually they either realize you aren't a native speaker and break into a really loud and generally grammatically incorrect sort of caveman dialect or they don't realize and continue to talk a mile a minute with no concept that you may not be following them at all. With a little gentle instruction however, most can become great sources of comprehensible input. As an added bonus this will increase the amount of actual communication that takes place and your friendship will become much richer. (http://www.everydaylanguagelearner.com/language-learning-resources/language-learning-activities/)

After highlighting the description about language learning through task and activities above, it can be concluded that the task and activities which will be implemented in the classroom should estimate or meet the demand and learning goals. In which task and activities are intended or used to help students in learning. It is essential that the students get involved actively in task and activities while learning. Therefore, task and activities should be made challenging, interesting, clear and fun.

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