読解授業におけるタスク活動の問題点

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Designing language learning activities for university students: challenges in using tasks in an EFL classroom

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要旨（Abstract）

学生が社会のニーズに応じた専門知識と技能を身につけ、その力を有効に使うためのコミュニケーション能力を持つことは、今日の大学の重要な目標である。特に英語教育においては中学・高校と大学の連携が唱えられるなか、高校までの学習で蓄積したものに、専門分野の方法論なども視野に入れた学術目的の英語をいかに組み合わせるか、ということを考える必要がある。

本稿では、全学共通科目である英語読解に新聞英語を採用し、その授業にどのようなタスク活動を取り入れたら効果的かという観点から、学習者要因の分析と英語教科書の調査を行った。

先ず、経済学と人文科学を専攻とする学部生を対象にアンケート調査によるニーズ分析を行った。この結果をもとに、対象状況やスキルの目的によって、どのようなタスクが有効かということを考察した。またそれを通じて、基礎教育課程と専門教育課程をつなぐ一貫した学習プログラム作成のための、今後の課題と可能性を探った。

1. Introduction

In Japanese universities where the language of instruction in disciplinary areas is primarily Japanese, English may be thought of as an auxiliary means of communication. However, in certain genres, it is apparently a dominant medium for processing information. Thus, even in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) situation, students would be called on to read and write texts in English, or be required to have foreign language proficiency to start their careers.

The present paper attempts to describe what 'tasks' would mean in an English course for Japanese university students. It also reports on learner factors for three groups of students majoring in different disciplines. Relevant issues for acquiring English reading skills and learning general and specific vocabulary are discussed.

2. Background

Using 'tasks' as part of a language program involves careful planning which, in many cases, is based on the requirements of a specific learning outcome. In addition to features of task itself, characteristics of the learning context need to be identified. The target area being a university English course and students taking lessons for academic purposes (EAP, English for Academic Purposes), what it is that comprises a language learning task needs to be shown before examining task cases in the real classroom. In this section, I will start with a review of task-based instruction in the history of English-language teaching (ELT) and also of definitions of 'task' put forward by researchers. Then, in succeeding sections, samples of pedagogic tasks (distinguished from real-world tasks, referred to as 'target-tasks' in Long, 1985) that are typically used in English reading textbooks will be examined. Target material will be newspaper

English and business English textbooks written for foreign university students.

2.1 The emergence of task-based instruction as a language teaching method

The term 'task' began to come into use in applied linguistics around the beginning of the 1980s. One of its aspects was as a tool for second language acquisition research, and another as a means by which learners can develop their second language grammar. It is important to note how this latter aspect appeared in the field of language teaching.

In the history of ELT, the 1970s to the present day is a phase when communication became a dominant idea influencing every aspect of language teaching, i.e., syllabus planning, teaching materials, testing and assessment, etc. (Howatt & Widdowson, 2004:250). This period is characterized by the growing number of overseas students joining general purpose learners of English in order to receive specialist pre-college instruction in English. Consequently, instruction in a new language had to be designed to meet the needs of learners intending to use it for real-life communication (p. 231). Hence, in the first instance, the communicative movement was directed at adults. For them, the object of learning was to be able to perform appropriately so that they would be accepted as speakers of English in their chosen academic or vocational (social) roles.

This situation allowed ELT to develop new methods and procedures that had not attracted much attention in the early years. New teaching material was produced that reflected the communication oriented needs of institutions, teachers, and learners, and a small percentage of them were later published to be used worldwide. Among these, there are two textbook series, mentioned in the literature (Swales, 1985; Hutchinson & Waters,

1987; etc.), as targeted at ESP (English for Specific Purposes) learners:
English in Focus (Allen & Widdowson (eds.), 1974-) and *Nucleus* (Bates &
Dudley-Evans (eds.), 1976-). These volumes are credited for introducing
the notion of task as a component of a language course.

2.2 Defining a task

Task-based instruction (TBI) is a language teaching method and is
classified as a communication-oriented approach. Ellis (2003), in his
survey of tasks, attempts to describe how a 'task' differs from other devices
for eliciting language from learners, such as 'activity', 'exercise', or 'drill'.
The wide-ranging variety of definitions cited in the survey shows the extent
to which a task is associated with different dimensions of the language
learning context.

As regards the scope of a task, there is a broad definition and a narrow
definition. A broad definition is represented by that of Long (1985) which
describes task as 'a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely
or for some reward.' and can be illustrated by examples such as painting a
fence, or taking a hotel reservation. According to this view, a task can be
anything that someone does with a specific purpose, and the use of language
is one of many aspects of reaching the goal. Compared to this, there is a
more narrow definition put forward by Nunan (1989) that says a task is '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.' While
admitting that such a distinction may be somewhat simplistic, Ellis adopts
the narrower definition; activities that call for meaning-focused language
use are labeled as 'tasks', and those that call for form-focused language use
as 'exercises'.

As for the present study, any classroom work that is implemented and performed with some input and a goal would be called a task.

3. Setting

Participants were all students from English reading courses included in the general curriculums of two universities. One freshman class and two sophomore classes participated in this study. In both universities, English classes are organized according to students' performance on a placement exam. The freshman class and one of the sophomore classes were 'advanced' classes with majors in humanities and economics respectively, while the other sophomore class was an 'intermediate' class with a major in information science. The number of students registered in these three classes was 94 in total. The average class size was 32 students with a maximum of 39 students.

For the purpose of collecting data about learner factors, a preliminary questionnaire was conducted on the first day.

4 Data: learner factors

A questionnaire was designed to elicit information on the students' learning style for reading and motivation. The worksheet included selected items from the SILL[1] (Oxford, 1990) and an additional self-reporting section.

The following are the results and discussion of four questions from the self-reporting section asking about the students' reading attitudes in their native language.

- When I read Japanese newspapers and magazines or browse through the internet, I...

Table 1. *Strategies used by reading class students*

	(number and percentage of respondents who answered 'yes')	
1. read only the headlines	17	18.1%
2. read only the articles that interests me	77	81.9
3. take a look at all the pages	15	16.0
4. take notes while I read	1	1.1
5. choose articles focused on a particular subject (for example, _____)	8	8.5
(94 respondents; multiple answers allowed)		

The total number of ticks by reading strategy is shown above. In answering the question, 14 students ticked both 1. and 2., and two students ticked both 3. and 5., suggesting that a total of 16 students 'run through the text in one way or another and select articles of interest'. Specified areas of focus by those who ticked 5. were: 1) sports and entertainment 2) topics related to his/her major (e.g. international relations, information technology, stories from the front-page column). Also, those who ticked only 3. accounted for a little over 10 percent (11 students), which shows that this is the proportion of students who don't restrict their reading to a specific topic (at least in their first reading). It is also interesting to note that one person reported that she 'reads the article of her interest taking notes while reading' (ticking both 2. and 4.). This respondent makes use of a relatively wide range of strategies for reading English when compared to her peers. The next three questions ask what sources of information are used for the academic purpose of each student, and what strategies they draw on for its

achievement.

- The study resources I use to prepare myself for specialized work in (the student's major) are...

Table 2. *Study resource used according to major*

Type of resource	(group 1)	(group 2)	(group 3)
1. lecture notes	32	23	18
2. textbooks	33	23	19
3. assigned reading material	15	2	1
4. library resources	25	4	2
5. the Internet	25	31	9
6. other resources	1	4	1
(for example, _____)			
(94 respondents; multiple answers allowed)			

group 1: N=40   Humanities   group 2: N=32   Information science
group 3: N=22   Economics

The resources utilized by students of different areas of study are roughly the same with all three groups (groups 1-3, see Table 2).   However, there are some differences in the number and distribution of resource types that were chosen.   To illustrate, the humanities students make use of more resource types than the other two groups (three types by 12 students; five types by 10 students).   Meanwhile, 50% (16 students) of those majoring in information sciences used the same type and number of resources (1. 2. and 5.) reflecting the frequent use of computers in their studies.   For economics majors, the pattern of use seems to be limited (two types by 10 students)

compared to other groups. From all three groups, answers by those who ticked 6. were: 1) reference books 2) lesson handouts 3) classwork itself 4) suggestions from peers.

The next question is related to English learning strategies; a modified version of the SILL. According to the outcome results, the pattern of strategies always or usually used and those least frequently used was nearly identical across groups (see Tables 3 and 4).

- To improve my English, I... (evaluation on a five-point scale)

    1. practice by myself.

    2. find someone to practice with.

    3. organize a study group.

    4. pay attention when someone is reading or speaking English.

    5. get someone to listen to my reading or speech.

    6. ask English speakers/teachers to correct me when I use English.

    7. find different ways of reading English as much as possible.

Table 3. *Strategies always or usually used by students (N=94)*

To improve my English, I... (usually or almost always...)
1. practice by myself. (57)*
4. pay attention when someone is reading or speaking English. (53)

( )* = % among the total number of students

Table 4. *Strategies least frequently used by students (N=94)*

To improve my English, I... (never or usually don't...)
3. organize a study group. (55)*

5. get someone to listen to my reading or speech. (64)

( )* = % among the total number of students

Although it can be inferred from this outcome that a task type which leaves people working independently may be suitable for these classes, data obtained from the next question includes a variety of learner needs that may require training using a wide range of activities. The reason is because different purposes and target situations are reported here.

- The topic of the seminar I am participating / plan to participate in is...
  (For my future goals, I want to study...)

  _____ .

Topics from students' reports (see footnote of Table 2)

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(group 1)
- contemporary social problems
- group discussion
- mass communication; journalism
- Japanese language
- psychology

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(group 2)
- the computer connected with other fields; applied technology
- developing software for specific needs

- designing user-friendly and exciting sources of information
- technology addressing environmental issues
- information sciences and economics; business and the Internet
- computer simulation of trading
- the use of social survey methods; the analytical approach

(group 3)

- Japanese financial system; economic history
- industrial psychology; economics of advertising
- reporting and discussing social security
- statistical economics
- communication skills—reading, writing, speaking

In the next section, I will discuss issues related to task design that can be observed when language textbooks are compiled.

5. Tasks used in an EAP setting

5.1 Range of observations

Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998: 4-5) describe the characteristics of ESP in the following way.

1. Absolute characteristics:
   - ESP is designed to meet specific needs of the learner;
   - ESP makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the disciplines it serves;
   - ESP is centred on the language (grammar, lexis, register),

skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities.

2. Variable characteristics:
- ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines;
- ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of general English;
- ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation. It could, however, be used for learners at secondary school level;
- ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students. Most ESP courses assume basic knowledge of the language system, but it can be used with beginners.

Both EAP (English for Academic Purposes) and EBP (English for Business Purposes) are subcategories, or branches of ESP (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Jordan, 1989; Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998). They share the characteristics named above, specifically, 'ESP makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the disciplines it serves; ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of general English.'

A view of commercial textbooks written for university English courses show how selection of topics and design of activities (or 'tasks') encompasses a lot, representing a mixed (or integrated) focus on both content and skills. I checked 13 Japanese publications (excluding the one actually in use) and five British and American counterparts in order to find cases of task types that meet such learner needs as exemplified in the previous section. Criteria for choosing the 18 sample textbooks were: 1) news stories, global

issues selected as topics, 2) dealing with English for business and economics, and 3) focus on reading skills. So the samples have either one of these features. Also, the following observation points were drawn from *English in Education* which is one of the British textbooks included in the samples.

1. How are the reading passages selected and presented?

2. Whether exercises vary from unit to unit.

3. With functions and forms in the text, what are students asked to do?
   - recognize targeted linguistic elements
   - build those elements themselves
   - manipulate them
   - plot them into a given schematic diagram

4. Is focus on form advocated or not?

5. Are there supplementary writing exercises?

6. Are there supplementary discussion topics? In the pre-reading or the post-reading stage?

7. Is strategic reading dealt with? Are the strategies targeted at reading English for general purposes or for academic and business purposes?

English in Education is a volume of the *English in Focus* series. As

previously referred to, the *English in Focus* is one of the best-known examples of ESP teaching material. As this series is written for adult learners having sufficient knowledge of English grammar, selective adoption of specific features may be the key for finding appropriate tasks for learners of EFL.

5.2 Observed results

As mentioned earlier, materials to be surveyed fall into two categories, i.e., topic- or situation-based, and skills-based.

5.2.1 Input in topic- or situation-based syllabuses

Learners will be exposed to general, semi-technical and technical vocabulary as forms of input. In this case, vocabulary input conforms to the topic of reading passages, i.e., the content of the text. Thus, reading about everyday situations would limit the readers' input to vocabulary expressing the content of those areas.

In the same way, reading about technical subjects may direct the readers' attention to the meanings of technical terms. In real-world situations, using that input for certain purposes presumably shared by that discourse group is, however, essential.

For example, when the act of reading is a subsidiary factor in a certain situation, doing something based on what is read or along with the reading becomes more important. Presenting additional devices for converting the knowledge of vocabulary into performing different functions would be effective.

5.2.2 Reading skills and other specific skills

By other specific skills I mean: 1) study skills for academic purposes, 2)

language skills other than reading, such as writing, and 3) skills related to the discipline. Activities for training reading skills are adopted for simplified texts of general interest and for newspaper texts. Although true or false exercises are included for comprehension check in many cases, there are few that require explanation or reasons for answering 'true' or 'false'. In one case, instructions guided learners to correct those that were marked 'F'.

Study skills are the overall learning attitudes, strategies and techniques required for successful studies in the academic environment. These include items such as notetaking, participating in seminars, writing reports and essays, finding reference work, etc. Integrating writing tasks and reading activities could be a way of designing study skills into reading-based material and transforming it into a teaching material for ESP. Even when the university curriculum requires a course targeted at reading and writing respectively, more integrated skills and parts of other skills linked to the main skill could effectively be used.

6. Summary

The research question underlying this study was how pedagogic tasks could effectively be designed for English learners of specific disciplines, taking their specialized subject courses in their native language. Needs analysis were conducted for groups of students of different disciplines. These students were taking reading courses using textbooks of newspaper English.

Among these groups, the results of the survey showed that while the types of reading resource mainly used in academic assignments were common, there were group differences reflecting subject-specific needs for manipulating information for future studies. Designs of tasks for these learners were discussed based on observations of English textbooks sharing

certain features. The findings show that further explorations are needed in the classification and sequencing of different task types tailored to specific learning situations. Particularly, the use of specialized subject area input material with convergent and/or divergent task procedures.

(Notes)

1. SILL refers to the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning. Learners who were more proficient and more motivated consistently reported on the SILL that they used a wider range of strategies, and used them more frequently, than learners who were less proficient and less motivated.

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