Using Tasks with Low Proficiency Learners in English Teaching

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Abstract

This paper examines the effects of using holistic tasks with elementary learners of English in a Thai university. The existing course for these learners used a discrete-point syllabus resulting in low motivation and involvement in learning. Six tasks, involving problem solving, creative thinking and values clarification, were added to the course. These tasks led to higher student participation and involvement in learning, and increased self-confidence and self-reliance. It is therefore concluded that holistic tasks provide an effective vehicle for teaching English to elementary learners.

Introduction

Within the last ten years, tasks have become increasingly prominent in language teaching. In Thailand, Watson Todd (1999) describes the use of combined tasks and content teaching at the tertiary level. While Watson Todd's article focused on the innovative use of tasks, the subjects in this study were fairly high proficiency students. Many teachers, however, feel that task-based teaching is only suitable for such high proficiency students and argue that tasks are inappropriate with low proficiency students. For example, Yalden (1987a, 1987b), in arguing for a proportional syllabus, claims that initial language teaching with elementary learners should focus on discrete-point linguistic forms, and that it is only with intermediate learners that the focus can be moved on to the discourse level and tasks. We believe that such a position is wrong. In this paper, we will start by highlighting the problems arising from focusing purely on discrete-point linguistic items with elementary learners, and then show the benefits of using tasks in such a learning situation.

The Situation

The situation in this study was a very basic English language support course for Bachelor degree students of Industrial Education at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi. The class comprised 37 Thai students (30 male, 7 female) aged 20 to 23. These students had graduated from Technical College with a Higher Vocational Certificate and had learnt no English in the previous two years and very little in the three years prior to that. They had the unfortunate reputation of being the lowest English proficiency students at the university, but are friendly and obliging if not motivated.

The course the students were taking was ostensibly organised as a situational syllabus but, in common with many such syllabuses (Long and Crookes, 1992), focused on discrete points of language and skills. Linguistic forms covered in the course include comparatives, complex sentences and discourse markers, and the micro-skills include scanning and getting the main idea. Evaluation on the course took the form of two examinations, both closely based on the discrete language points covered by the course material.

As the teacher, I (WS) was greatly concerned about the students' level of competence and was prepared to devote time and effort to help their learning. I was, however, constrained by the need to cover the course materials to prepare the students for the examinations. There was, then, a lot of washback from the examinations which restricted my choices as a teacher.

The Problems

The first problem arising from the course was perhaps theoretical, but was the root of all the other problems. The materials, as has been pointed out, covered discrete language points. Furthermore, these language points were covered in a mechanical rather than a meaningful way. Arranging a course around a series of discrete language points assumes that the course designer knows what the students should learn. Language, however, does not consist of a series of isolated items which are learnt in an additive, linear fashion (Long and Crookes, 1992; Willis, 1996). Instead, language learning is organic and holistic, and so the focus should be on how language is to be learnt not what is to be learnt.

Moreover, the language items chosen for the course were inappropriate for the students. By predetermining language points to be learnt, the students' needs are ignored and students may be forced to learn what they do not need

or what they are not ready for. In an extreme analogy, van Lier (1996) compares a discrete language point syllabus to a doctor who treats all patients for 'flu on Monday and for a broken leg on Tuesday irrespective of their real ailments. For the Industrial Education students in this study, this mismatch between predetermined course objectives and needs was very real. The course had been designed for several groups of students, some with a much higher level of proficiency than the students in this study. Thus, the course expected the students to learn about complex sentences and relative clauses when they still had problems with subject-verb-object word order in a simple sentence.

A further consequence of this mismatch between the course and the students' needs was its unfortunate effect on my teaching style. Despite my best efforts to avoid such situations, because of the students' low comprehension of the materials, I (WS) was constantly forced to provide and reprovide explanations of unclear points. The teaching, therefore, devolved into a series of enforced explanations as I tried to salvage some comprehension from the materials.

Given this situation, it is little surprise that the students were demotivated. The mechanical nature of the materials further reduced students' motivation as they could not see the usefulness or any applications of learning English. This, in turn, reduced students' participation in the classroom and their attentiveness in learning. In addition, the mechanical materials aimed to teach language only, and did not attempt to cover broader educational objectives such as cognitive skills or attitude change.

Requirements for Solutions

The problems stemmed from the mechanical, discrete-point nature of the materials used in the course. It is therefore logical to attempt to use meaningful holistic materials as the basis of a solution. Using such materials would have several consequences on the teaching-learning process in the course.

Firstly, the traditional presentation-practice-production teaching approach associated with discrete point materials would have to be replaced (Willis, 1994; 1996). Holistic materials encourage hypothesis formation and testing by the students, and language points to be covered are determined by the students' needs rather than by the course designer. An approach using

holistic materials, then, would start at the production stage with students' language needs treated later, perhaps through presentation.

Secondly, using meaningful, holistic materials gives the teacher a greater variety of possible interaction patterns in the classroom. Discrete-point materials generally result in interaction which is authoritative (since the teacher controls the content through the material), transmissive (since the teacher's role is to convey the language points to the students), and product-oriented. Holistic materials, on the other hand, are more likely to result in interaction which is exploratory, transformative, and process-oriented, especially if the students are given the chance to form hypotheses about the language rather than being given rules by the teacher. The characteristics of interaction associated with holistic materials are more likely to lead to deeper, longer-lasting learning (van Lier, 1996) and to result in increased student-teacher and student-student interaction.

A third consequence of using holistic materials starting in the 'production stage' is that the students are given greater control over their learning. The amount of control students have over their learning is strongly correlated with the quality of their participation in the classroom (Ellis, 1985). By participation here, we do not mean the amount students talk, since a meaningless drill can lead to a lot of student talk but little involvement in learning. Instead, participation refers to the extent to which the students are actively involved in their learning, and so includes concepts such as attentiveness (Pica, 1994) where students are participating even though they are not producing language.

The problem of discrete-point materials not promoting the broader educational objectives of cognitive skills and attitudes may also be solved through using holistic materials. As we shall see, many holistic materials are organised explicitly around cognitive and affective objectives.

The final problem, that of low motivation, may be overcome through the consequences of using holistic materials described above. Brown (1981; 1987) posited three kinds of motivation: global, situational and task-oriented. Global motivation refers to overall attitudes towards learning, situational, in this case, refers to attitudes towards language learning, and task-oriented motivation is the motivation to complete a specific activity or task. In the short run, task-oriented motivation is the only type of motivation which can feasibly be changed. However, if motivation can be increased in the short

term, there may be knock-on effects on situational and global motivation. Certain aspects of holistic materials are likely to increase task-oriented motivation. Meaningfulness is correlated to motivation (Wright, 1987); materials which are moderately challenging are also motivating, especially if the challenge is cognitive (Clifford, 1993); and opportunities to become actively involved in learning increase motivation (Moore, 1989).

Tasks as Holistic Materials

Having seen the potential benefits of learning language holistically rather than point-by-point, we need to consider how to put holistic learning into practice. Among the many variations of language learning syllabuses, task-based learning is the one most closely associated with holistic learning (Krahnke, 1987; Long and Crookes, 1992), since a task can "provide a purpose for the use and learning of language other than simply learning language items for their own sake" (Rubdy, 1998: 264). Furthermore, tasks encourage hypothesis formation and testing and teaching directed towards students' needs (Willis, 1994).

Given that tasks have the potential to encourage holistic language learning, the next point to consider is what tasks to use. Willis (1996) suggests that tasks can be classified as listing, sorting, comparing, problem solving, sharing experiences, and creative thinking. In choosing from this list, we must take into account the need for the tasks to promote cognitive and affective objectives. Problem solving and creative thinking are cognitive skills, and thus tasks involving these skills should promote cognitive objectives. Affective objectives can be achieved through values clarification tasks which involve sorting and comparing. To promote holistic language learning, then, three types of task, problem solving, creative thinking, and values clarification, were used.

Problem Solving Tasks

Perhaps the neatest definition of problem solving is also one of the oldest. William James in the nineteenth century defined problem solving as "a search that occurs when the means to an end do not occur simultaneously with the establishment of the end" (quoted in Meadows, 1993). With the need to find a means to an end, in problem solving the students' attention is not focused on the language data *per se* (Danesi, 1989), and thus problem solving promotes holistic learning.

The literature on the use of problem-solving tasks in education is resoundingly positive. Problem solving is motivating (Schleppegrell and Bowman, 1995), challenging (Legutke and Thomas, 1991), and empowering (Wallerstein, 1983). Problem solving increases students' involvement in learning (Block, 1994; Nation, 1991), decreases student dependence on the teacher (Block, 1994), and teaches valuable thinking and life skills (Schleppegrell and Bowman, 1995). Furthermore, problem solving is a key skill required by students of science and technology such as those in this study (Souillard and Kerr, 1990).

There are, however, also two major criticisms of the use of problem solving in language learning in the literature. The first argues against the use of problem solving in all situations. Sheen (1992) conducted an experimental study comparing increases in the language competence of two groups of learners, one of whom had been taught traditionally and the other taught through problem solving. Worryingly, he found that the first group showed greater improvements in language competence. However, his measurement of language competence consisted of a discrete point grammar test which evaluated learners' improvement in those discrete points taught in the 'traditional' group. This bias in the evaluation procedures of the research makes the whole experiment extremely suspect, and his findings can be discounted.

The second criticism of problem solving may be particularly relevant to this study. Legutke and Thomas (1991) argue that problem solving should only be used with learners of at least intermediate level of competence, and thus should not be used with elementary learners like those in this study. It is unclear, however, what the terms "intermediate" and "elementary" are referring to. Both of the authors work in Europe where elementary learners of English are usually also young learners, whose cognitive skills have not fully developed. If the warning against using problem-solving tasks with elementary learners refers to age as well as competence, then it is not applicable to this study where the learners are mature. In any case, this study intends to test Legutke and Thomas's hypothesis concerning the feasibility of using problem-solving tasks with learners of elementary competence.

On balance, then, problem solving should provide an appropriate task for the students in this study, and so two problem-solving tasks were selected for use with the students. The first was taken from Reisberg (1997: 570). In this task, there is a room in which two ropes are hanging from the ceiling.

Unfortunately, the ropes are positioned far enough apart that a person cannot take hold of one rope and reach the other while still holding the first. The students' task is to find a way for one person to tie the two strings together. This task is Task 1 in this study.

The second problem-solving task was given to the students as Task 3. In this task, adapted from Paulston and Bruder (1976: 67-68), students are told that they will go on a camping trip and they must decide what they need to take. They are given a list of possible items, but the total weight of the items in the list far exceeds the weight they can carry. Students must therefore decide which items to take based on usefulness and weight.

Creative Tasks

Whereas problem solving involves convergent thinking in searching for a single best solution, creative tasks promote divergent thinking. Fontana (1995) cogently argues that, although convergent and divergent thinking are complementary and equally necessary skills, education has placed a far greater emphasis on convergent thinking at the expense of divergent thinking. If this is true for the American educational system which Fontana writes about, it is probably even more true for the Thai educational system where there is a lot of cultural educational inertia. In teaching cognitive skills in Thailand, then, a higher emphasis than is given at present should perhaps be placed on divergent thinking.

For this reason, three of the tasks used in this study involved creative thinking. Creativity involves fluency in the generation of a large number of ideas, flexibility in the generation of a variety of ideas, elaboration in filling out an idea, and originality (Leigh, 1983). The creative tasks used in this study were selected on the basis of their likelihood of promoting these four characteristics.

Task 4 and Task 6 were similar and both were taken from Christison and Bassano (1987). Task 4 (adapted from pp. 21-22) is a variation on the Rorschach test, which is widely used in psychology. In this test, inkblots are used to elicit different interpretations and mental images. In this study, a handout with various inkblots on it was given to students who were asked to interpret the inkblots in at least five different ways. Task 6 was similar, but in this task the input took the form of incomplete pictures (adapted from pp. 23-26). Instead of inkblots, students were given a handout with some lines

on it and were asked to imagine how the lines could be completed to form a picture.

The third creative task was adapted from Baudains and Baudains (1990: 21-22). Students were asked to imagine that they were on a desert island with no resources when they find a box containing twenty-four cans of Coca-Cola. Their task was to think of as many uses for the cans as possible.

Values Clarification Task

The remaining task aims to achieve affective, rather than cognitive, objectives. Values clarification is closely associated with the humanistic movement (Legutke and Thomas, 1991), and aims to encourage students to become clearer about what they believe (Green, 1975) and to promote self-understanding (Blair, 1991). Goals such as these are generally overlooked in education, and values clarification may play an important role in producing graduates who are well-rounded as well as academically competent.

In the values clarification task, Task 2 in this study, students were asked to imagine a situation where there were seven survivors of a plane crash. There was, however, only enough food and water to sustain four of the survivors. Details of the survivors, such as a young pregnant woman and a blind girl who was travelling for an operation, were given, and the students were asked to decide which of the seven survivors should be given food and water. Completing this task should raise students' awareness of their priorities in life and thus promote self-understanding.

The Use of Tasks in this Study

In the first half of the term, as the teacher I (WS) followed the course and materials assigned. It quickly became clear that the students lacked interest and motivation, and the interaction and participation in the classroom were inadequate. I therefore decided to use the holistic tasks described above.

Washback from the final examination, however, constrained the extent to which these tasks could be used. The examination took the form of a discrete-point test, and so I was under an obligation to cover the discrete points in the existing materials to prepare students for the examination. The use of holistic tasks was therefore reduced to being an adjunct running parallel to the discrete-point course, rather than being the core of the course. Nevertheless, I hoped that the findings of this study could point to ways in

which the course could be adapted, or even re-designed, for the greater benefit of students.

Data Collection

In investigating the effects of holistic tasks in the classroom, the researcher is faced with a choice. Firstly, the researcher could use several well-designed instruments to collect reliable data. This might involve videoing lessons, asking students to write journals, interviewing students and so on. Although the data collected will be rich, the profusion of research instruments may be intrusive to such an extent that conducting the research will affect the teaching and thus the results. Secondly, the researcher could place a greater emphasis on the teaching rather than the research. In doing this, no instruments which could be intrusive are used with the result that the teaching is unaffected but the data collection is sparse. In this research, our priority was to help the students' learning. For this reason, the only instrument used to collect data was the teacher's notes taken in the classroom. Some people may argue about the subjectivity and lack of triangulation involved in using only one instrument or about the paucity of the data, but in this situation we believed that teaching must take precedence.

Findings

For all tasks, students were asked to discuss the tasks in groups of 3 or 4, reach a conclusion, and then give a presentation to the whole class. Initially, despite the elementary level of the students, we hoped that much of the discussion and all of the presentations would be in English.

From Task 1, the students showed much higher levels of participation and involvement in learning than previously. Many students asked the teacher for help concerning the meaning of unknown vocabulary items, how to express certain concepts in English, clarification of the instructions, and the validity of their solutions to the task. The first two of these indicate that students' immediate needs were being addressed through the tasks.

Although the discussion stage in Task 1 promoted high participation and involvement, there were problems during the presentation stage. Because of the large number of students, the presentations took some time, and students in the audience became restless and did not concentrate on the presentations. I (WS) realised that this was a potential problem, and addressed it by allowing presenters to mix Thai and English in future presentations to

increase fluency, and by asking the audience to identify and correct errors made by the presenters.

Over the next two tasks (Tasks 2 and 3), levels of participation and involvement remained high with students asking the teacher for help. In addition, students started asking for help across groups, promoting a cooperative atmosphere in the classroom as well as showing high involvement. Regarding the presentations, students listened more attentively and attempted to correct errors.

By Tasks 4 to 6, while still retaining the same high levels of participation and involvement, the students were becoming self-reliant. More of their questions concerning vocabulary and the like were addressed to other students rather than the teacher, or were answered using other resources such as dictionaries. Students also exhibited more self-confidence and awareness of the affective and cognitive goals of the tasks. Students presented naturally and fluently in a mix of Thai and English, and the audience attended well.

For Task 5, however, problems arose. Several students complained that the task was too difficult for them. They claimed that this difficulty was cognitive, not linguistic, and that because of the difficulty of the task they were not satisfied with the content of their presentations. This suggests that teachers need to be aware of the level of cognitive difficulty of tasks. However, we are unaware of any methods of measuring levels of cognitive difficulty in tasks, suggesting that further research is needed in this area.

Despite the problems of Task 5, overall the use of tasks with the elementary students in this study was successful. The use of holistic tasks led to greater participation and involvement in learning, indicative of higher levels of motivation. Students also became more self-confident and self-reliant.

Conclusion

From one perspective, there is nothing particularly new in this research. The use of holistic tasks has been advocated by several authors for the last ten years. However, most investigations of tasks have concentrated on their use with intermediate or advanced learners. The viability of using holistic tasks with elementary learners has been far less clear. We hope that this paper has suggested that tasks are an effective vehicle for teaching English to learners of low competence. For the situation discussed in this paper, we hope that the findings may lead to a reevaluation of the suitability of using discrete-

point materials, and possibly to the redesign of the course, so that learners may become more motivated and involved in their learning.

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