A poster presentation task using task-based language teaching

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English courses at Osaka Shoin Women's university are taught based on task-based language teaching (TBLT). This paper examines a lesson plan implemented at the university from TBLT perspectives. First, a lesson plan using a poster presentation task is presented. Second, rationales for the main design features of the plan are discussed from task-based learning perspectives.

Lesson Plan

Objective

In this lesson, each student makes a poster presentation on a narrative story of her personal past experience. The target linguistic form in the lesson is the use of the past tense. Students choose one topic from the following list:

- ✔ I was so sad then;
- ✔ I was so happy then;
- ✔ I was so embarrassed then; and
- ✔ I was so surprised then.

Procedure

Pre-task

Step 1: The teacher begins the lesson by showing a sample presentation of her/his own story.

Step 2: Provide students with a task sheet including questions such as "What happened?" "When and where did it happen?" "Who were you with?" "How did you feel then?"

Step 3: Have each student choose a topic and take notes on the sheet to organize her presentation. Instruct the students not to write in sentences.

Step 4: Have each student create a poster using photos which are related to her

story or by drawing a picture. In order that photos can be used, briefly inform the students of the lesson plan in advance and ask them to bring some photos.

Main-task (A Poster Presentation Task)

Step 1: Divide students into two groups (A and B). Have Group A students display their posters on the wall and stand by them. Have Group B students visit a poster presentation so that all the students are paired up.

Step 2: Have Group A students make their presentations using their posters. Have Group B students listen to the presentations and ask questions.

Step 3: Have Group B students move in a clockwise direction to listen to another presentation. Repeat Steps 2 and 3 three times.

Step 4: Have them switch roles so that Group B students make presentations and Group A students listen to presentations. Repeat Steps 2 and 3 three times.

Post-task

Step 1: Have each student prepare a manuscript of her presentation.

Step 2: Have them form pairs and switch their manuscripts.

Step 3: Have them underline and check all the verbs on the manuscripts for correct use of the past tense.

Step 4: Have each student provide feedback to her partner.

Step 5: Collect manuscripts and provide feedback in the following class.

Rationale

Aims of the Task

In this lesson, students make a poster presentation on a narrative story of their personal past experience. The target linguistic form in the lesson is the use of the past tense. The task is appropriate because producing a narrative story of one's past experience entails use of past tense. The task does not predetermine use of a specific past tense, but allows students to choose appropriate language according to their stories. As such, the main-task incorporates an incidental or broad focus on form. In the post-task phase, however, students are led to direct their attention deliberately and intentionally to language forms. Nation (2007) argues that a well-balanced language course should consist of four roughly equal strands

of (a) meaning-focused input, (b) meaning-focused output, (c) language focused learning, and (d) fluency development. By incorporating intentional language focused learning in the post-task phase, the lesson maintains appropriate balance among the four components.

Pre-task

In the pre-task phase, students prepare content, language, and visual aid (i.e., a poster) for their poster presentations. In Step 1, a model presentation is shown to the students. Simply observing a model performance can reduce the cognitive load of the learner (Ellis, 2003; Willis, 1996). By grasping what they are expected to do in the following main task phase, students can reduce the potential anxiety that might be derived from ambiguity on the expected task. It helps them to concentrate on their preparation. In Step 2, students plan their presentations. When they are prepared, they can allocate their attention to many aspects of the task performance. As with observing a model performance, planning reduces the cognitive load of students in the main task phase. Students perform planning in terms of both content and linguistic resources. Questions on the sheet elicit content information from students. In this guided planning, students can prepare an outline of their presentations relatively easily by responding to questions on the sheet. They can also become prepared for the task in terms of language resources as they can look up key words which they want to use in the main task phase. This linguistic preparation, however, does not prevent their authentic language use. They are not allowed to write a sentence, but are to take notes merely at word and phrase level. If they write down and memorize all the things which they want to express, they might perform the task from memory, which prevents an opportunity to stretch their interlanguage and operate at the outer limits of their current abilities (Newton & Kennedy, 1996, p. 310). They would be prepared linguistically for the main task, but merely be informed of some key expressions available to be produced within spontaneous or exploratory speech in the main phase. Researchers have shown that planning improved the learners' language performance in terms of complexity and fluency (Crookes, 1989) and accuracy (Ellis, 1987). Planning in the pre-task phase has positive effects on

students' linguistic performance.

Main-task

In the main task phase, students form a pair and make a poster presentation. Ellis (2003) describes six criterial features of a task, all of which are included in the present task. Of particular interest to the present paper are the following features. Firstly, the task involves 'a primary focus on meaning' (p. 9) and 'real-world processes of language use' (p. 10). The main objective of the poster presentation is to convey a personal story based on students' own experiences. Each student has her own story that her listener does not know. It creates an information gap between a presenter and a listener. Moreover, sharing a personal story induces intrinsic interest on the part of both the presenter and listener. It motivates learners to communicate (i.e., real-world processes of language use) and promotes meaning-focused output and input. The language use in performing the task is authentic. Secondly, the 'task engages cognitive processes' (p. 10). Students are not provided with any linguistic models to follow, but have to choose language from their own language resources in order to construct their personal story. Thus, students are pushed to use their cognitive abilities in engaging the task. Finally, the 'task has a clearly defined communicative outcome' (p. 10). After a presenter accomplishes the task of telling her own personal story to her partner, the partner responds and asks questions concerning the presentation, which represents the fact that the presenter's message was successfully conveyed to the listener. At this time, a communicative outcome is clearly visible.

In addition to these critical features of a task, repetition is utilized in the main task phase. The students change partners and repeat the same task (a poster presentation) three times. Research in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) has shown the positive effects of repetition. For example, repetition produces learners with greater syntactic engagement (Bygate, 1996, 1999, 2001), enhances advanced learners' confidence in language use (Lynch & McLean, 2001), and leads to greater focus on content (Gass, Mackey, Alvarez, & Fernandez, 1999). Although some negative effects of repetition (e.g., learners' negative

reactions to repeat a task) have also been reported (Plough & Gass, 1993), students do not perform tedious duplication of the task in the present task. As students change partners and make their presentations to three different listeners, authentic communication occurs in every repetition. Furthermore, as each listener is required to ask three questions about a presentation, a different interaction occurs with each partner. "Different people will do tasks in different ways and a variety of partners could provide different learning opportunities" (Bygate, 1996). As such, repetition is not a mere repetition, but is "more like recycling, or retrial" (Johnson, 1996), where a new interaction occurs with a new partner. When this task was implemented in class, the students did not show any reluctance to repeat the task, but showed a favorable attitude toward it. They appeared to view it as a communication opportunity with a new partner. Laughter filled the classroom, and they appeared to talk in more depth than they did in other lessons. Young talkative female students seemed to enjoy the opportunity to share their experiences.

In order to acquire a foreign language, learners need to notice the gap between their current interlanguage and a target language (Swain, 1995). The main task is also designed to promote such noticing and awareness. In the pre-task phase, students look up key words to get ready for the main task. As they are not allowed to write a sentence, let alone a whole story, a presentation in the main task is the first attempt for them to construct the whole story. Because they are performing the task from their own language resources, they certainly experience linguistic difficulties and inabilities when doing so. Such is the chance for them to become aware of the language forms they need to learn. They can acquire the ideal forms subsequent to such noticing. The task raises awareness and noticing through providing challenges in their authentic language use.

Post-task
In Step 1 of the post-task phase, the students compose their stories. In the main task phase, they notice "a gap between what they want to say and what they can say" (Swain, 1995). In the post-task phase, they search and confirm ideal

language forms, and fill the gap between their current interlanguage and the ideal language in the process of writing. In general, students can spend more time on sentence construction in writing than in speaking. Thus, they can reflect on their language performance more carefully and in more detail. Moreover, the writing activity gives them another opportunity to repeat the task in a different mode (i.e., in writing). Even though the content is the same between the speaking task and the writing task, performing it in the different language skills does not bore them but gives them a feeling of performing a new assignment.

Although the speaking and writing tasks promote students' language acquisition through pushing their output and restructuring their interlanguage, the focuses are placed more on fluency than accuracy development. In order to reinforce the accuracy aspect of the language learning, the lesson plan incorporates a consciousness-raising task that promotes the learning of the target linguistic feature (i.e., past tense). After writing the story, each student switches papers with her partner. Then, they underline all the verbs in their partner's story so that the target linguistic features are made explicit to them. Then, they check grammar of all the underlined verbs. In this manner, they can direct their attention to the target linguistic feature (i.e., past tense), and perform accuracy focused learning. It also creates an opportunity to read a story, thereby developing an additional language skill, i.e., reading. This poster presentation lesson design provides for students to practice all four language skills of speaking, listening, writing and reading in a lesson. Through reading their partner's work, they can also have a clearer idea on how the task should be performed. As such, it also promotes their monitoring and reflection on their own work.

Conclusion

This lesson plan was implemented several times at the university. Evidenced by the laughter that filled the room, the students convinced me that they greatly enjoyed the task. Many students commented, "It was fun" after the lesson. One student even said, "I'm so thirsty because I talked a lot." These comments indicate that they enjoyed the social interaction in English and concentrated on

the task intensely.

This paper examined a lesson plan implemented at Osaka Shoin Women's university from TBLT perspectives. I hope that the present paper contributes to a better understanding of a TBLT lesson for novice language instructors using TBLT.

Acknowledgements

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