A Consideration of the Dimensions of Effective Instruction for Task Based Learning

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1. Introduction

In this paper, I will analyze a task based learning (TBL) English lesson I taught at a junior high school. I will show that problems in class management, the structuring of the lesson, grouping, and task planning contributed to the failure to attain the objective of the lesson. This experience demonstrates the factors instructors must consider when conducting TBL lessons as well as the challenges they face. I encourage readers to learn from my experience and experiment with TBL in their respective contexts.

2. What is TBL?

TBL is learning in which learners attain knowledge through completing a task. Although SLA researchers have yet to come to a complete agreement on a precise definition of tasks for EFL (Ellis, 2003, p.2), the common characteristic in all the definitions is that a task is a language activity with a goal that is attained through learners using the language. Since the TBL lesson to be presented later in this paper was based on the Lee (2000) model of task-based instruction, I will use his definition of task. According to Lee (2000, p.32), a task is

(1) A classroom activity or exercise that has: (a) an objective obtainable only by interaction among the participants, (b) a mechanism for structuring and sequencing interaction, and (c) a focus on meaning exchange; (2) a language learning endeavor that requires learners to comprehend, manipulate, and/or produce the target language as they perform some set of work plans.

Thus, in an ideal TBL situation, learners interact in the target language to complete some kind of work plan. The task is structured in such a way to enable learners to interact and the focus of learners' output is on meaning

rather than accuracy. Tasks also require learners to listen to language and use that language in some way to accomplish the objective. The following section will discuss the dimensions of effective instruction for TBL.

3. The dimensions of effective instruction for TBL

Richards (1987) argues that the following dimensions of teaching can account for effective and ineffective instruction: *classroom management, structuring, task* and *grouping*. Although *task* is obviously a key dimension of effective instruction for TBL, the other dimensions represent areas of instruction that can encourage learners to become more active, involved, and motivated in language learning activities and are thus relevant to conducting effective TBL.

The first dimension, *classroom management*, refers to "the ways in which student behavior, movement, and interaction during a lesson are organized and controlled by the teacher to enable teaching to take place most effectively" (Richards, 1987, p.218). Considering that tasks are intended to promote interaction among learners, when conducting tasks, instructors must conceive of class management schemes that will encourage learners to interact in the target language and remain focused on the task objective throughout the class.

Structuring refers to whether the instructor's intentions for the lesson are clear to the learners and the activities are "sequenced to a logic and structure that students can perceive" (Richards, 1987, p.218). In a similar vein to Richard's notion of structuring, Dornyei (2001) writes that learners' understanding of the utility and objectives of a task is a necessary condition for their motivation to participate. More specifically, learners should first understand that the task is a learning opportunity for them rather than compulsory labor. A second necessary condition according to Dornyei is that each learner should have a role and understand their role before the task is to begin. If a task can be completed without the cooperation of all members of a specific group, there are likely to be learners who will not participate in the task. A third condition is that the task should be presented in such a way that stirs learners' interest in the task. In conclusion, learners should have an idea

of what will happen in a TBL lesson, what they are expected to do, the objective of the lesson, and feel that this will be a useful process.

Task, defines tasks as activities that instructors conduct to attain certain objectives. Richards (1987, p.219) discusses the types of decisions teachers must make when planning tasks. First, instructors must decide on the *response mode demands* or the kinds of skills that the tasks should involve. Next, instructors must decide the *interactional mode demands* or how the tasks should be accomplished. For example, should learners work individually, in a pair, or in a group? Also, instructors must decide the *task complexity demands* or how difficult the learners will perceive the task to be. If the learners perceive the task as too difficult then they will soon give up, but if they perceive the task as too easy they might not have enough interest to participate in the task.

The last dimension is the *grouping* in which the learners will carry out the tasks. This involves determining the seating arrangement as well as whether to have groups whose members are of mixed abilities or groups whose members are of the same ability and understanding the repercussions of each decision.

In the following description of my TBL demonstration lesson, we will see how the above dimensions, class management, structuring, task, and grouping influenced the outcome of the lesson.

4. A demonstration of a TBL lesson

The TBL lesson was conducted in October, 2005 at a junior high school in a city in Iwate. It was a demonstration class (*kenkyuujugyou*) in which I taught a homeroom of 37 first graders whom I had never met before. The class was 50 minutes, and there were 30 English teachers from the local area who observed the class while I taught it. The primary objective of the class was to conduct a survey in which learners find out which television program and school lunch are the favorite of most class members as well as which blood-type is the most common. The linguistic objective of the class was to learn how to use "Does [name] like ~?" as a means of making guesses about other people's likes and dislikes. It was hoped that learners would use this

construction to accomplish the objective of the lesson. This lesson consisted of a sequence of 5 tasks (Tasks A, B, C, D & E) with each task designed to serve as a stepping stone for learners to attain the primary objective.

At the ending of the class learners completed a self evaluation sheet (see Appendix 1). Learners rated to what extent they were able to accomplish each task on a scale of 1 to 4. A score of 1 meant they were able to do the task very well, a score of 2 indicated that they were generally able to do the task, a score of 3 indicated that they were not generally able to do the task, and a score of 4 meant that they were not able to complete the task. Learners also rated their interest of a task on a scale of 1 to 4. A score of 1 meant that they were very interested in the task, a score of 2 meant that they were mostly interested in the task, a score of 3 meant that they were mostly uninterested in the task and a score of 4 meant that they had very little interest in the task.

Below, I will introduce the plans for each task followed by an account of how learners participated in the task. In the parentheses below each task heading, the amount of class time scheduled for each task and the materials used will be displayed. In the discussions of how learners participated, their ratings on their degree of accomplishment and interest for each task will be displayed.

Task A

Plan (Time: 7 Minutes; Materials: Video and Task A/B Worksheet): The instructor tells learners that this first task is a warm-up. Learners watch a video tape of two people, Mr. Unher and Jasmine, speaking. They circle the questions that they hear. The questions to be circled are "What is your favorite television program?", "What is your favorite school lunch?", and "What is your blood type?" (see Worksheet Sample 1). The objective of Task A is to introduce the learners to the topic of the survey and give them confidence by asking them to do an easy activity with language that they have already studied. Another objective of Task A is to give learners language that they can use for Task B.

Worksheet Sample 1: Part of Task A /B Worksheet

Topic	質問	パートナーの答え
Television program	• Do you like television? • Do you watch SMAP x SMAP? • What is your favorite television program?	
School Lunch	• Do you eat school lunch? • What is your favorite school lunch? • Is your favorite school lunch octopus?	
Blood Type	• What is your blood type? • Is your blood type O? • Do you have a blood type?	

Learner Participation: For all the tasks, the actual course of events differed from the original plans. During Task A, learners could not initially understand the video tape. After I played the video tape several times, they were able to understand the questions, but no one wanted to volunteer an answer as to what question they heard. It was also surprising that many learners did not circle the question that they heard. Task A was intended to be a very simple, confidence building task, but learners' reactions at the time indicated that it did not have this effect.

Afterwards, however, as Table 1 shows, 29 learners reported that they were able to accomplish the task and 25 reported having some interest in the task. This means that although learners did not follow the directions (i.e. circle the questions) many felt that they were able to accomplish the objective of the task because they understood which questions were asked.

Table 1: Task A self-evaluation results			
Extent of Accomplishment		Interest	
1	9	1	14
2	20	2	11
3	7	3	5
4	1	4	4

The number in the left column signals the rating of the item and the number in the right column indicates the number of learners who chose that particular rating.

Task B

Plan　(Time: 5 minutes; Materials: Video and Task A/B Worksheet): The instructor introduces the day's goal which is to find out the favorite television show, most common blood type, and favorite school lunch of the class. Learners make pairs and ask their partners the questions that they heard in Task A and record their partners' answers (see Worksheet Sample 1). The pairs are decided by the instructor before the class and learners know who their partner will be beforehand.

Learner Participation: Because of the difficulties learners experienced with Task A, I decided that they would only ask each other the question, "What is your favorite television program?" in Task B.　Thus, the primary objective of the lesson was reduced to finding out the most

Table 2: Task B self-evaluation results			
Extent of Accomplishment		Interest	
1	10	1	17
2	20	2	9
3	5	3	3
4	2	4	4

The number in the left column signals the rating of the item and the number in the right column indicates the number of students who chose that particular rating.

popular television show of the class. After making pairs, some learners refused to ask each other the question or said that they did not understand what they were supposed to do even though the directions were written on the worksheet in Japanese. Many learners also did not record their partners' answers to the questions. Altogether Task A & B took twice as long as originally planned and this overuse of time prevented us from accomplishing the original objective.

　Regarding learners' reactions to the task on their self-evaluation sheets, Table 2 shows that 30 of 37 learners reported that they were able to accomplish Task B and 26 of 33 reported having interest in the task.

Preparation for Task C:

Plan (Time: 5 minutes; Materials: Blackboard): The instructor demonstrates how to use the construction "Does [name] like ~?" and how to respond to it.

Task C

Plan (Time: 10 minutes; Materials: Video and Task C Worksheet): Learners watch a video of the instructor playing a guessing game with Mr. Unher. In this game, the instructor guesses what Jasmine's favorite television show, favorite school lunch, and blood type are (Mr. Unher had ascertained this information from Jasmine in Task A). In the video, the instructor uses the construction, "Does Jasmine like ~?" and Mr. Unher responds by saying "Yes she does" or "No she doesn't". Learners watch the video one more time and write down the instructor's questions as well as Mr. Unher's answers. For example, the instructor asks, "Does Jasmine like Karakuri Terebi" and Mr. Unher answers "Yes she does". The learners then write both the question and answer in their worksheets (see Worksheet Sample 2). Learners can work

Worksheet Sample 2: Part of Task C Worksheet

	ホール先生の推測	アンハー先生の答え
Television Program	1) Does Jasmine like Karakuri Terebi?*	No she doesn't.*
	2)	
	3)	
* Sample answer supplied by the instructor.		

with their partner from Task B or individually for this task. The purpose of this task is to demonstrate to learners the language they will need to use in Task D.

Learner Participation: For Task C, it took the learners a long time to write "Does Jasmine like ~?" and the corresponding answer. One reason for this was that the learners had just been introduced to the construction. However, I had taken this into account and given the first question and answer in the video on the worksheet (see Worksheet Sample 2). This was to serve as a hint as to how to write the questions that they heard. The construction was also written on the blackboard. Nevertheless, many learners did not use the hint

to help themselves. I had hoped that learners who struggled with the task

would ask their partners from Task B for help but this expectation was not realized. Table 3 shows that more learners, a total of 11, reported not being able to accomplish the

Table 3: Task C Self-Evaluation Results			
Extent of Accomplishment		Interest	
1	10	1	15
2	16	2	12
3	10	3	5
4	1	4	2
The number in the left column signals the rating of the item and the number in the right column indicates the number of learners who chose that particular rating.			

objective of this task than the other tasks. If learners did not understand the construction "Does [name] like ~?" it would be difficult for them to complete Task D successfully.

Task D

Plan (Time: 10 minutes; Materials: Task D Worksheet): The pairs from Task B join another pair to make groups of 4. The groups of 4 are decided before

Worksheet Sample 3: Sample of Task D Worksheet

1	Task C の会話を参考にして、Student A と Student B は Student C に Student D の好きなテレビ番組等を推測する。			
2	Task C の会話を参考にして、Student C と Student D は Student A に Student B の好きなテレビ番組等を推測する。			
3	Task C の会話を参考にして、Students A and B は Student D に Student C の好きなテレビ番組等を推測する。			
4	Task C の会話を参考にして、Student C と Student D は Student B に Student A の好きなテレビ番組等を推測する。			
	Pair 1		Pair 2	
	Student A Name:	Student B Name:	Student C Name:	Student D Name:
Favorite Television Program				
Favorite School Lunch				
Blood Type				

class and learners are to be informed of which classmates they will work with before the class begins. The pairs are to play the guessing game exhibited in the video in Task C. One pair makes a guess about the member of the other pair's favorite television show, blood type, and favorite school lunch (Please see Worksheet Sample 3). For example, to guess someone's favorite television show, Pair 1 (Students A and B) asks Pair 2 "Does Student D like *sekai no ichiban uketai jugyou?*" and Student C can answer either "Yes he does" or "No, he does not." Pair 1 continues to ask until they guess Student D's favorite television program. Each learner is also assigned a letter the day before the class, so that they know whether they are Student A, Student B, Student C or Student D before the task begins.

The objective of this task is for learners to find out the favorite television show, favorite school lunch and blood type of each member of their group. These results will be used to complete Task E. It is hoped that learners will use the new construction for this task. The worksheet has detailed instructions so that each learner understands their role in the task and, most importantly, understands that they are all expected to speak and interact with one another.

Learner Participation: At the beginning of Task D, groups of 4 learners put their desks together to make a table. At first, I chose one group to demonstrate how to do the task while I coached them. The group was surprised that they were chosen to demonstrate and very hesitant to do so.

Each group was to find out the favorite television show of each of its members. Task D started poorly, as

Table 4: Task D Self-Evaluation Results			
Extent of Accomplishment		Interest	
1	10	1	14
2	22	2	13
3	4	3	5
4	1	4	2

The number in the left column signals the rating of the item and the number in the right column indicates the number of students who chose that particular rating.

learners did not understand what they had been asked to do. Some learners read the instructions on the worksheet with a puzzled look, while others sat

at their tables with their arms folded. Although the exact procedure that they were to follow was written on the worksheet (see Worksheet Sample 3), learners could not or would not follow the procedure. I frantically patrolled the class trying to help groups get the task underway. Eventually groups were able to ascertain the favorite television shows of all its members, but they did not necessarily follow the procedures that were specified on the worksheet nor did they necessarily use the target structure. Furthermore, learners struggled to speak in the target language and quite often used their native language to ask questions or give answers. By the time we had finished Task D, the 50 minutes of class time had expired.

Despite the significant difficulties of this task, Table 4 shows that more learners, 32, responded that they had accomplished the objective of this task than the other tasks. Furthermore, 27 learners reported that Task D was interesting for them.

Task E and Self-Evaluation (Time: 10 minutes; Materials: Blackboard, Self Evaluation Forms)

Plan: In this task, each group reports their members' answers for Task D to the instructor who writes the answers on the board. It is then determined which is the most popular television program, most popular school lunch and blood type of the class. After Task E, learners complete their self evaluation forms.

Learner Participation: Because we were not able to conduct Task E, the learners' responses in their self evaluation forms are not shown here. As the class time had expired, I took sample answers from 4 groups or about 16 learners. Groups were shy to volunteer answers perhaps because it had not been determined who would report the results for the group.

From the 16 answers, I made a guess as to what the class's favorite television show might be. Learners then filled out their self evaluation forms and I retreated to the principal's office mortified at having done a demonstration lesson that did not go according to plan.

5. Analysis of the TBL Lesson

Returning to Lee's (2000, p.32) definition of task, the plan of the demonstration class seemed to meet the conditions of the definition. First, the objectives of finding out the favorite television program of the class etc., could only be attained by interaction among the participants. The sequence of tasks, the grouping of learners into pairs and groups of 4, and explicit directions on the worksheet served as mechanisms for structuring and sequencing interaction. Second, the interaction between the learners entailed a focus on meaning. Third, it was necessary for learners to comprehend and manipulate the language from Tasks A & C to accomplish Tasks B & D. Nevertheless, the results indicate that something went wrong with this TBL lesson. To determine what went wrong, I will examine the class management, grouping, structuring, and task dimensions of the lesson.

Class Management: It took learners several minutes simply to start working on a task, and they seemed reluctant to interact with each other in English or Japanese. During each task, it seemed that each measure I took to induce groups, pairs, or individuals to focus on the tasks failed. The primary reason was that beforehand I had expected pairs and groups of learners to help each other or try to work out a problem together when they were performing a task. Learners, however, were hesitant to help each other. I could not take effective steps in class management because there were too many learners at one time who were having trouble with a task. Perhaps class management would have been easier if more consideration had been given to grouping before the class began.

Grouping: Groups had difficulty cooperating with each other and were not cohesive. Before the class began, using the class seating chart I indiscriminately grouped learners into pairs and then groups of four. Grouping learners randomly in the EFL class can be problematic. For example, if the class is of mixed abilities, and two learners who are paired are of low ability in the language, the probability is high that they will not succeed on the task. If learners of low ability are paired with those of higher

ability, then the learner with higher ability can offer support to her partner and they can complete the task. Aside from varying degrees of ability in the target language, the typical junior high school classroom is also home of an array of complex human relationships which cannot be ignored; in some cases boys and girls might be hesitant to work with one another; in other cases certain learners should not be paired because they will not cooperate on working on a task together.

In hindsight, perhaps asking the class's regular English teacher to make the pairs and groups of 4 based on her knowledge of the learners might have made the group work proceed more smoothly. Nevertheless, grouping alone cannot explain learners' hesitance to participate in the tasks, another factor was structuring.

Structuring: First, sometimes the tasks lacked adequate introductions to stir the learners interests in doing the tasks. For example, for Task A, I simply told learners to listen to the video and circle the questions; how exciting is that? Also, I did not explain to learners why I wanted them to do Task A and thus they did not see the utility of the task.

Many learners did not understand the primary objective and linguistic objective of the lesson until Task D and thus could not understand the usefulness of Tasks A, B & C. Thus, although learners tended to report that they were interested in Tasks A, B & C, their lack of understanding of the rationale behind the tasks might have contributed to their reluctance to participate actively

One last problem in structuring was evident in Task E, where groups were hesitant to report the favorite television shows of their members because no one had been designated a group spokesperson. In other words, learners did not understand their roles.

Task: In addition to structuring, there were problems with my planning of the tasks. Concerning the task component, it is apparent that I underestimated the task complexity demands or how difficult the learners were likely to find the task. Five learners wrote in their self evaluation sheets that they felt very

nervous at the beginning of class because of all the visitors and could not understand the first few tasks. Given that there were 30 people whom they did not know observing the class, it is highly likely that other learners felt the same way. Furthermore, 3 learners wrote that even though they knew the answers to some of the questions directed towards the class they could not speak out and say the answer (i.e. in Task A). Given that very few learners responded to questions directed towards the class it can be surmised that these 3 learners were not alone in their sentiments. Thus, I failed to take into account the possibility that the exceptional environment in which the class was conducted would hinder learners from concentrating on the task and raise the complexity of the task.

Lastly, response mode demands of the task required learners to listen and read language and use that language in their speech to communicate with their peers. In Tasks B & D learners struggled to use the language that they had heard and written in Tasks A & C to complete the tasks. In other words, learners were not used to using language they hear in the input they are exposed to in their output. This particular strategy should have been explained and practiced beforehand.

Although I have focused mainly on the negative aspects of the TBL lesson, overall learners were positive about their experience. In tasks A, B, C & D most learners wrote that they were able to accomplish them and that they were interested in them. Additionally, twenty-five learners wrote in their optional comment on the self-evaluation sheet that they enjoyed the lesson, 11 learners wrote that they understood the lesson very well, and 3 learners wrote that they enjoyed working with friends. Considering (to my knowledge) that this was the first TBL experience these learners had had, the overall results are respectable.

6. Conclusion and Final Words

The primary problems with the lesson were with questionable decisions I made with grouping, structuring, and the response mode and level of complexity of the task. Also, when we were on task, measures I took with class management to encourage the learners to focus did not work. These

misguided decisions originated from my lack of knowledge of the learners. Had I known the learners beforehand, I believe that I could have made better decisions in grouping and planning tasks. Thus, the tasks would have been more appealing and useful to the learners.

What we can learn from this experience is if the instructor understands her learners, different task options, and the dimensions of effective instruction for TBL, there is no reason why she cannot conduct a successful TBL lesson. I encourage readers to experiment with TBL and hope that this paper serves as a useful reference.

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Appendix 1 – Self-Evaluation Form

自己評価

Name:_____

授業で行ったぞれぞれのタスクに関して、タスクに対する自分の達成度（自分が十分にできたかどうか）とその関心度について1～4に○をつけなさい。

Task	達成度	関心度
Task A	1・2・3・4	1・2・3・4
Task B	1・2・3・4	1・2・3・4
Task C	1・2・3・4	1・2・3・4
Task D	1・2・3・4	1・2・3・4
Task E	1・2・3・4	1・2・3・4

1＝ **達成度**：私はタスクがとてもよくできた
    関心度：タスクがとても面白かった。
2＝**達成度**：私はタスクが十分できた・
    関心度：タスクが面白かった。
3＝**達成度**：私はタスクがあまりできなかった。
    関心度：タスクがあまり面白くなかった。
4＝**達成度**：私はタスクが全くできませんでした。
    関心度：タスクが全く面白くなかった。

授業の全体についての感想があれば、下に書いてください。私は感想を書いた学生に、必ず返事をします。

Thank you!

James M Hall