

## Using Tasks in Teaching Practice: Helping Pre-service Teachers Learn to Promote Students' Language Use

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### Abstract

This study investigates how tasks in pre-service teacher education can help aspiring teachers learn to promote students' language use in the English class. A task is an activity where learners interact in the target language to achieve a non-linguistic outcome. Based on Willis's framework for Task Based Learning (1996), three pre-service teachers conducted a jumble task in 4 classes at a junior high school. Self evaluation sheets were given to students after each class to determine how effective the tasks were in encouraging them to use English, and the teachers' discoveries about encouraging students' language use were revealed through a post-practice written report. Teachers discovered that the way in which tasks are demonstrated and explained can have a significant impact on students' language use. I propose that when using tasks in pre-service teacher education, the instructor should consider choosing the task and making the basic outline of the lesson so that teachers can devote more time to practice how to expedite the task. I also propose using an abbreviated version of Willis's framework in future practices so that teachers have more time to present the task and students have the opportunity to repeat the task.

### 1. Introduction: A Rationale for Using Tasks in Pre-service Teacher Education

To promote the development of students' communicative competence the new Course of Study (*Gakushuushidouyouryou*) for English, which is scheduled to be enacted in 2012, proposes several significant changes for junior and senior high schools. Among the changes are increasing the number of class hours for English in junior high schools (JHS) from 105 to 140 and requiring teachers in high schools (HS) to conduct English classes in English. With the increase in JHS class hours and the movement for more use of the target language in the HS English class, secondary school teachers will likely

have more chances to try language learning activities that emphasize communication such as tasks. What is a task? Samuda and Bygate (2008) define it as follows:

A task is a holistic activity which engages language use in order to achieve some non-linguistic outcome while meeting a linguistic challenge, with the overall aim of promoting language learning, through process or product or both. (p.69)

The image this definition conjures is appealing—that of learners making the effort to communicate in English with their classmates in order to achieve the task objective, which then helps them consolidate their knowledge of the language they used. Nevertheless, according to Littlewood (2007), tasks have rarely been used successfully in East Asian contexts, including Japan. He elaborates on the root of the problem and proposes a solution:

Teachers can draw on the ideas and experiences of others but cannot simply adopt them as ready-made recipes: they need to trust their own voice and develop a pedagogy suited to their own specific situations. (p.248)

Thus if teachers wish to use tasks as a means to promote students' language use, they must determine how to adapt them in a way that will make them suitable for their contexts. One can also make the argument that teacher education should not only introduce teaching innovations to encourage student language use but also provide aspiring teachers with the experience of trying to adapt them to a specific context. Being able to do the latter will determine the success of the innovation. With this in mind, the author introduced a one day teaching practicum for pre-service teachers where they conducted a class at a junior high school to encourage students' language use. This purpose of this study is to examine how conducting tasks can help pre-service teachers learn how to promote students' language use.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Teacher and Student Participants

The pre-service teachers in this study were three graduate students at the author's university who were majoring in English education and were also members of the author's graduate seminar in English language teaching. The students participating were 151 second year students belonging to a total of 4 classes at the JHS affiliated with the author's university. The JHS English teacher of these students served as an advisor to the three teachers.

### 2.2 Selecting and Planning the Language Learning Task

The author asked the teachers to choose a text-based task and after much deliberation, they decided to conduct a jumble task. In a jumble task, learners must negotiate in English to arrange mixed pieces of text into their original order. The teachers

were also asked to base their lesson plan on Willis's (1996, p.155) Task Based Learning (TBL) framework (see Table 1).

The reason why Willis's

**Table 1: Willis's TBL Framework**

|                   |          |        |
|-------------------|----------|--------|
| Pre-task          |          |        |
| Task Cycle        |          |        |
| Task              | Planning | Report |
| Language Analysis |          |        |

framework was employed was that it has received exposure in Japan through several practical studies on using tasks (For example, see Yoshikawa et al., 2008), and there is a Japanese version of Willis's book published by a major Japanese textbook publisher. It was thought that teachers might encounter this framework after they find full time employment and that this pre-service teaching practice would be useful in such a case. In Willis's framework, the objective of pre-task is to prepare learners for the task by reviewing relevant language or having them do a practice version of the task. The task cycle consists of three stages, a task stage where learners do the task, a planning stage where learners plan to report to the class how they did the task and the report stage. In the language analysis phase, the teacher conducts consciousness raising activities about the vocabulary or grammar that appeared in the task.

The teachers spent approximately 4 weeks preparing for their lessons. In

the first week, they chose the type of task and made a lesson plan. In the second week they showed the lesson plan to the JHS English teacher who gave feedback. After this they spent the remainder of the second week and the third week revising their lesson plan. By the time the final lesson plan had been approved by the author, it had been revised 5 times. In the final week before the lesson, the teachers made teaching materials as well as a questionnaire to give to students. Seminar time was devoted to choosing the task, revising the lesson plan and making teaching materials.

### **2.3 Conducting the Language Learning Task and Collecting Data**

Teachers conducted the 4 classes using tasks on June 30, 2009. The teachers taught the classes in pairs where one teacher functioned as the primary teacher and the other functioned as an assistant. During the practice, the following data was collected. First, all the classes were videotaped for later analysis. Second, students completed a self evaluation sheet in which they answered questions about the extent to which they felt they were able to perform the task in English and wrote a reflection. Third, after the teaching practice, the author asked the teachers to write a 5-page “letter” to Jane Willis to give advice about how tasks can be used in Japanese JHSs. The teachers’ discoveries about tasks were extracted from this report and they were asked to discuss these discoveries in the seminar.

Using the above data, I will answer the following questions in the proceeding section: 1) How did the teachers design the task to promote students’ language use? 2) To what extent did the students use English? 3) What discoveries did the teachers make about promoting student language use through tasks? Lastly, based on these answers, I will discuss the implications for using tasks to help pre-service teachers learn to promote students’ language use.

## **3. Results and Discussion**

### **3.1 Task Features to Promote Student Language Use**

The goal of the class was for students to use English during the jumble task to order a text and then to reflect and improve upon the language that

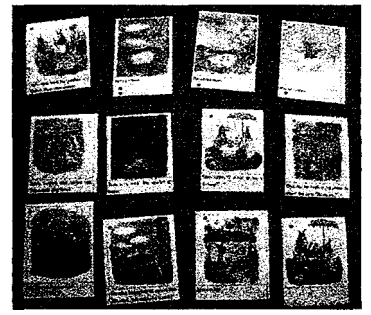
they used during the task in the planning and report stages. The teachers conceived of the following task features to promote student language use.

### *Teaching Materials - Comprehensible Language and Visual Aids*

It was determined that the text for the jumble task should be new to the learners so that they would have to read it carefully to order it. The text used was based on the children's picture book *Sylvester and the Magic Stone* by William Steig (1969). With the author's help, the teachers rewrote the text so that it would be comprehensible for the students (See Appendix A). The rewritten text consisted of 98 tokens and 51 types. Of these words, 8 had yet to

appear up to the current stage of the textbook the students were studying, page 31 of *New Horizon 2* (Kasajima et al., 2006). However, it was likely that many of the students were familiar with some of these words such as *red*, *rock*, *police*, and *spring*. Furthermore, the name of the main character was changed from Sylvester to Taro because it was thought that it would be easier for the students to remember. Laminated cards

Picture 1: Cards used for the jumble task.



for each page of the book were created so that each card contained a picture from the story and the text (See Picture 1). Although it was necessary to read and understand the text to order the cards, it was hoped that the pictures themselves would provide clues.

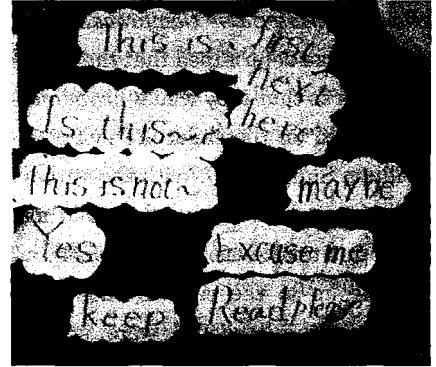
### *Pre-task - Language Assistance and Demonstration*

To enable the students to arrange the story in English, the teachers first planned to tell students the outline of the story as follows, "Taro is a donkey. He likes stones. He finds a magic stone and then something terrible happens. What happens to Taro? Please put the story together." It was hoped that grasping the outline would help students process the story in a top-down fashion which would help them arrange the cards in the proper order.

After giving the outline of the story, the teachers planned to teach the

new words and then demonstrate how to do the task. The objective of the demonstration was to not only show students how to do the task but also show English expressions that would be helpful to do task. While the teachers demonstrated how to do the task they planned to post useful expressions on the board (See Picture 2). After this demonstration students would do the task in pairs.

Picture 2: Expressions to help students complete the task.



### *Planning, Reporting and Language Analysis to Encourage Future Language Use*

It was hoped that in the planning and report stages of the task cycle students would learn useful language to be able to perform a similar task in the future. In the planning stage the students would be asked to transcribe a part of the dialogue that they spoke in the task stage. After students transcribed the dialogue, pairs would make groups of 4 and each pair would perform their dialogue in front of the other. The pair that was listening was to write down the useful expressions that they themselves would like to use. In the report stage, pairs of students would be selected by the teachers to perform in front of the class. In the language analysis stage, the teachers would focus students' attention to various phrases used in the report stage to encourage their future use.

### **3.2 The Extent to which the Task Encouraged Language Use**

Table 2 shows how much English the students reported using during the jumble on their self evaluation sheets. It must be acknowledged that the amount of English students reported speaking might not reflect how much English they actually spoke. However, based on the observations of the author,

supervising JHS teacher and student-teachers in addition to the questionnaire responses, it can be concluded that the jumble task did not encourage language use as much as the teachers had anticipated. It was also observed that Class 2 students were more involved in engaging in the task and many pairs made the effort to use English. This can be tentatively supported by questionnaire responses which show that more students in Class 2 reported doing the task in “almost all English” than the students in the other classes. The disparity between Class 1 and Class 2 is particularly conspicuous as 21 students in Class 2 reported doing the task in English compared to 6 in Class 1.

**Table 2: Degree to which Students Reported Doing the Task in English**

|                             | Class 1   | Class 2   | Class 3   | Class 4   |
|-----------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Almost all English          | 6         | 21        | 7         | 9         |
| Half English, half Japanese | 18        | 13        | 26        | 28        |
| Almost all Japanese         | 14        | 5         | 4         | 0         |
| <b>Total</b>                | <b>38</b> | <b>39</b> | <b>37</b> | <b>37</b> |

To show why Class 1 and 2 had different results, I will compare how the teacher (T1) introduced the task in Class 1 to the teacher in Class 2 (T2). The excerpts from both classes are below. In each class, the teachers were assisted by an assistant teacher, T3. The numbers in parentheses indicate the time elapsed for a particular demonstration or explanation and ‘...’ indicates a pause.

**Excerpt 1: Explanation and Demonstration of the Jumble Task for Class 2 (12:04)**

- 1 T2: Today... I and you use only English. Today's topic is use English...
- 2 use English... make a story in English. Today, I have a picture
- 3 book and it is only in English. He is Taro (*points to the picture of*
- 4 *Taro*) and he likes stones but bad things and lucky things happen
- 5 to him. And this story has some new words, I show them to you.

|   |   |
|---|---|
| (1:32)  |   |
| <i>T2 introduces the new words. (1:55)</i>                        |   |
| 6<br>7  | T2: Next we play jumble. Jumble is ordering picture and at first make two people pairs. ( <i>Explains how to make pairs in Japanese and passes out the cards for the jumble.</i> )  |
| 8<br>9<br>10<br>11<br>12  | T2: We will show you how to play jumble. Jumble has two rules. Number 1, we speak only English, no Japanese. And Number 2, at first we read the sentence, at first, and then ordering picture. I show you how to play jumble. In the demonstration we only use English. Please look at us and listen to us carefully. (4:07)                    |
| <i>T2 and T3 perform the demonstration for the jumble. (4:04)</i> |   |
| 13<br>14<br>15<br>16<br>17  | T2: Next is your turn, you try to only use English like us. You can use these phrases ( <i>points to the phrases on the board and repeats them</i> ). Do you understand?<br>S: <i>them</i> . Do you understand?<br>T2: No.<br>No? ( <i>Explains what the students have to do in Japanese and does part of the demonstration again.</i> ) (1:28) |
| <i>Students start the task.</i>                                   |   |

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <b>Excerpt 2: Explanation and Demonstration of the Jumble Task for Class 1 (10:59)</b>                               |  |
| 1<br>2<br>3<br>4<br>5<br>6   | T1: Today we use only English. You, you speak only English, not<br>Ss: Japanese, OK?<br>T1: OK<br>You can do it! Today we use this picture book, a picture book, the title is Taro and the Magic Stone. But this... this picture has very difficult words. So first check... check new words. (1:10) |
| <i>T3 writes the goal on the board "Use English to put the story together," and T1 teaches the new words. (2:29)</i> |  |
| 7<br>8<br>9<br>10  | T1: Ok, you did very well. Today we will use this ( <i>T1 shows the cards</i> ). You can use this [ <i>sic</i> ] picture cards and you make a story... You make a story... which is first, which is second... But before, we will show how to do this. Look carefully. (0:59)                        |



*T1 and T3 demonstrate the task while posting useful phrases on the board and then have the students practice the phrases. (5:07)*

11 T1: You can use the words with your pair so we will give you these  
 12 cards to your pair and we... you will do jumble and jumble is  
 13 ordering cards and make a story with your partner. And there are  
 14 two rules. First is use English and second is use these words  
 15 (*points to the words on the board.*) Make pairs in two and move  
 16 your desks, ok? (1:14)

*Students are silent and inactive.*

What are the differences in the way the tasks were introduced? First, in Class 2 (See Excerpt 1), before demonstrating how to play jumble, T2 gives students the outline of the story (Lines 2 - 5), explains to students what "jumble" is (Line 6), passes out the cards that students will order and tells them that they will order them in pairs (Lines 6 - 7), and lastly tells students the rules for playing jumble (Lines 8 - 12). In Class 1 (See Excerpt 2), the teacher forgot to tell students the outline of the story (Lines 3 - 6) and did not explain to the students that they would be ordering the cards in pairs or the rules of jumble (Lines 7 - 10) before demonstrating the jumble task. Another difference is that in Class 2, T2 asks the students whether or not they understand after his English explanation (Line 15). When one student says no, he spends approximately a minute explaining the task in Japanese and repeating part of the demonstration. After this explanation, when T2 signals for the students to begin they promptly start the task. In Class 1, however, after T1 tells the students to begin, there is silence and inaction. Interestingly, of the four classes, Class 2 was the only one where the teacher used some Japanese to explain the task. Thus, it is possible that the teacher's Japanese explanation helped students understand what they should do during the task and was also a strong factor in Class 2 having more students using English than the other classes.

Regarding the planning and report stage of the task cycle, in all the classes, students took longer to do the jumble task than anticipated leaving only 10-15 minutes for the planning and report stages and the language analysis phase. This was not enough time. In Classes 1, 3, and 4 this problem

was exacerbated because the students did not use as much English for the jumble task as projected and thus struggled to transcribe their dialogue in the planning stage. Despite these problems, students in each class were able to present their dialogue in the report stage and the teachers provided feedback.

It should be noted that despite the lack of language use, participating in the task offered some benefits for the JHS students. After observing the classes and reading the students' questionnaire responses, the JHS teacher said that the teaching practice had made her realize that her students wanted to try more speaking. In their reflections on their self evaluations, of the 151 students, 58 wrote about a benefit they received from this experience. This included such responses as they were happy to have the opportunity to use English or that they enjoyed trying something new. Thirty-two students wrote about some aspect of their performance they would like to improve upon next time. These responses ranged from wanting to use more English next time to wanting to use the phrases they had studied that day. Since the reflections were open responses, it is impossible to know how many students felt that they benefited from the experience or realized their own areas in need of improvement. Nevertheless, these responses could indicate that students managed to see the value in speaking English during the task and were willing to partake in a similar task again. As one student from Class 3 wrote:

Up to now because I could not use the English I studied much in conversation, I have not been very skilled in English. After this, I would like to study English that I can use.' [Author's translation]

### 3.3 Teachers' Discoveries about Features of Tasks that Encourage Language Use

Based on this teaching practice, the teachers wrote about ways to encourage language use during tasks in their letters to Jane Willis and presented their discoveries in the last seminar. This section will describe the main discoveries that teachers made. The first discovery was that the presentation and demonstration of the task in the pre-task stage can often determine the ultimate success of the task. For example, T2, who taught Classes 2 and 3 wrote the following:

Especially I felt the importance of pre-task because it influences all following activities. I taught two classes, [Class 2] and [Class 3], and [Class 2] students used more English and more students evaluated them [sic.] on their reflection paper that they tried to use English a lot. Why did this difference occur? I think that because [Class 2] students understood the task and what to do before the task, they could try to use English phrases from the demonstration.

Second, teachers discovered the importance of giving students a rationale for doing a task. Giving learners a rationale means explaining the purpose and utility of a task which Dörnyei (2001, p.79) presents as necessary to present tasks in a motivating way. A rationale for students to do the task is that the experience of using the English they had studied previously will help them improve in using that language (Willis, 1996, p.15). In all four classes, however, teachers told students that the goal of the lesson was, "Use English to put the story together," but did not give any rationale for doing the task nor an outline of the lesson. Thus, students went through the task cycle - task, planning, reporting - not knowing what would come next in any of the stages nor the rationale for a particular stage. Thus, T1 wrote, "I think it is not a good thing for teachers to only give tasks to students without explaining the outline because students are not robots."

Third, teachers discovered the importance of giving rules for doing the task. Before the demonstration in Class 2, T2 gave students the following rules: "We speak only English, no Japanese" and "...at first we read the sentence [on the cards]... then ordering picture." Regarding the second rule, for students to be able to organize the cards it was necessary for them to understand the text on the card. Thus, the teachers asked the students to read the texts carefully before beginning the task. This was a strategy for completing the task and when learners understand strategies for completing a task, they are likely to be more motivated to partake in it (Dörnyei, 2001, p.79). Regarding the first rule, T2 told the students they could use only English during the task before the demonstration so that they would pay attention to the language used in it. He wrote that this rule "helped [the students] know

what to look and listen to during the demonstration.”

Fourth, teachers discovered the importance of supplementing English explanations with the L1 when students are not following the task explanations. As discussed earlier, in the classes where there were no supplementary explanations in Japanese, students struggled to understand what they had to do for the task. T3 wrote, “Although we need to use English as much as possible, it is sometimes better to use Japanese to help [the students] understand important things.”

The last discovery that teachers made was the necessity to consider the place of tasks in the secondary school English curriculum. For example, T3 wrote, “perhaps students want to use the language that they learned, so the teacher should provide the time and chances for students to speak in pairs or groups.” T3 elaborated that the predominant teaching style in Japan is Presentation, Practice and Production (PPP) so teachers should consider “how to apply [tasks] into PPP.” In the seminar this led to a discussion of Task Supported Language Learning (TSLT) in which tasks are used as a means to accomplish the pedagogic goals of a syllabus versus Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) where the syllabus is centered on tasks. Takashima (2005) advocates TSLT for Japanese schools because the curriculum is based on a structural syllabus.

#### 4. Conclusion and Implications

The questionnaire data showed that teachers did not succeed in promoting student language use to the extent that they had hoped but their letters show that they learned ways to introduce a task in order to encourage learners to use English. Furthermore, the teachers also developed a sense of the place of tasks in the Japanese secondary school curriculum. Lastly, many of the JHS students reported that they appreciated the opportunity to use English and the JHS teacher expressed an interest in increasing speaking activities. Thus, although the results were both positive and negative, I believe that efforts to use tasks in pre-service teacher education can both help pre-service teachers learn how to promote language use and benefit students. In the remainder of this paper I will make two proposals for how this practice

can be improved.

The first proposal is to provide teachers with more assistance for creating the lesson plan when they are not experienced with using tasks. In this study the teachers spent most of their time revising the lesson plan rather than practicing the lesson itself. This lack of practice was evident in how they explained and demonstrated the task in the pre-task stage. Thus, in cases where the teachers are not familiar with tasks, the instructor should consider choosing the task and designing the basic structure of the lesson so that the teachers can devote more time to practicing how to explain and demonstrate tasks as well as handle unexpected problems (i.e. what activities to abbreviate when time becomes scarce, how to encourage hesitant students to speak, etc.).

The second proposal is that teachers eliminate the planning stage of Willis's task cycle to allow teachers more time to explain the task and students more time to prepare. It will also provide students the opportunity to do a second task to monitor how their performance improved. It has been shown that repetition of the same task as well as giving learners sufficient time for preparation can lead to learners improving on the complexity and fluency of their language during the task (See Yoshikawa et al., 2008, for a discussion of this). Taking this into account, the teachers in this study, the JHS teacher and the author determined that future trials should allow for sufficient time in the pre-task stage for the teacher to explain the rationale behind tasks and demonstrate the task. After students understand what they have to do and the rationale behind the task, they should then do two similar tasks. During the first task, they are encouraged to use as much English as possible and afterwards the teacher calls on a few pairs to demonstrate. The teacher gives comments on students' performance and students share how they did the task in Japanese. After this, students do the second task in English only. Afterwards the teacher asks some students to demonstrate the task and gives feedback. For evaluation, students compare their performance in the first and second task.

Overall, this study has demonstrated that trying new teaching methodologies can be a difficult process but that there is something to be learned even from partially successful trials. It is my belief that increasing the

amount of English used in JHS and SHS classrooms will require teachers to experiment with new teaching methodologies and learn how to apply them to their contexts from their successes and failures. It is therefore essential that teacher education introduce aspiring teachers to this process.

Lastly, I would like to note that T2 ultimately took up the topic of explanation and demonstration in the pre-task stage for his graduate thesis. A summary of his study can be seen in the current issue of this journal.

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**Appendix A: Text of story: "Taro and the Magic Stone"**

Card 1: Taro lives with his mother and father. Taro likes stones.

Card 2: One day he finds a red stone. It rains. He says "Be sunny!"

Card 3: It is sunny!

Card 4: He goes home but he sees a lion. He says, "I want to be a rock!"

Card 5: Taro is a rock. He cannot go home.

Card 6: Taro's mother and father say, "We cannot find Taro!"

Card 7: So, they ask the police.

Cards 8, 9 and 10 (They appear together): Autumn comes. Winter comes.  
Spring comes.

Card 11: One day in May, Taro's mother and father have a picnic. Taro's father finds the red stone.

Card 12: Taro says, "I want to be a donkey!"

Card 13: (There is no text but the picture shows that Taro has turned back into a donkey).

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