The Deployment of Tasks and Stylistic Approach in Teaching Poetry to Japanese Adult Learners

Alexandra Shaitan
Chuo University

Abstract

There is currently enormous interest in task-based teaching and learning. Proponents of task-based teaching (TBT) argue that the most effective way to teach a language is by engaging learners in real language use in the classroom. This is done by designing tasks that require learners to use the language by themselves. In this paper, through a lesson plan on teaching poetry to a group of Japanese adult learners of English, the author highlights the importance of creating and sequencing tasks as part of a well-balanced approach to teaching a foreign language. The stylistic approach and the sequence of tasks ensure that there is an equal focus on grammar forms and the meaning of the linguistic material.

Introduction

One approach to teaching that has attracted a lot of attention over the past thirty years is a task-based approach to learning and teaching. It has assumed a central part in both pedagogy and research, especially in SLA. There is now a considerable volume of research on task-based learning and second language acquisition, and Ellis' (2003) book-length study confirms the maturity of this field, linking together language learning and teaching theory and practice in a coherent perspective.

In task-based approaches, the focus of classroom activities is on the task, and ultimately on the meaning. The advantage of the task-based approach, according to its advocates, is that during the task the learners are allowed to use whatever language they want, freeing them to focus entirely on the meaning of their message. This makes it closer to a real-life communicative situation.

What exactly is a task?

Ellis (2003, p. 2) concludes that, "in neither research nor language pedagogy is there complete agreement as to what constitutes a task." According to Skehan (1996), a task is "an activity in which: meaning is primary; there is some sort of relationship to the real world; task completion has some priority; and the assessment of task performance is in terms of task outcome" (p. 40). Ellis viewed assessment tasks as "devices for eliciting and evaluating communicative performances from learners in the context of language use that is meaning-focused and directed towards some specific goal" (p. 279).

Class and Course Background

This poetry-based lesson plan was designed for Japanese adult learners of English. The students' English level was high-intermediate with TOEIC scores of 600-675. There were 16 Japanese-speaking learners of mixed abilities in the class who were used to Communicative Language Teaching as suggested by their experience of task-based lessons in the past, in particular with information and opinion-gap tasks.

Surveys that were administered throughout the course suggested the majority of students preferred task-based lessons to audio-lingual or grammar-focused ones. They strongly requested that more task-based lessons be included in the curriculum designed by the instructor. At the same time, students stated that they enjoyed listening to English songs included in the curriculum, as well as watching American movies in English without subtitles

in Japanese. They had group discussions and performed tasks based on the movies or songs while the teacher supported them by acting as a guide. The students did both open and closed tasks and were informed at the beginning of the lesson about the tasks that were to be assessed after the students had accomplished their assignments. The students' oral performance was assessed by the teacher, by self-assessment or by peer-assessment.

The idea of implementing poetry in the syllabus was suggested by the answers in an open-ended questionnaire conducted by the author during the class in which all students but one found English poems to be boring and difficult, in spite of the fact that most of them loved songs in English. This served as the catalyst for including this poem-based lesson plan in the curriculum, guided by the belief that "reading poetry is the kind of activity that allows students to refresh themselves intellectually and emotionally by touching the deep sources of their own humanity" (Rosenkjar, 2006, p. 119).

Goals, Objectives and Rationale
The objective of the lesson was to develop literary competence, in particular to enable students to read and understand poetry for themselves through task-based learning, and then present their own interpretations of the poem. The lesson engaged learners in task-based activities by focusing on different language forms found in the poem. These activities move learners through a series of interactional groupings: from pairs to whole class to pairs to whole class. By the end of the lesson students should be able to produce reasonable interpretations supported by the evidence found in the poem.

This lesson is based on a short and simple poem, "Child on top of a greenhouse", by Theodore Roethke (see Appendix 1) that demonstrates how tasks can serve to integrate focus on form with focus on meaning, in a lesson based on a poem. The language used in the poem lends itself directly to the integration of form-focus and meaning-focus through tasks. Widdowson (1992) attributes this to the representational nature of literary language, a process which means that literary texts are intended to give readers the feeling of (re)experiencing some emotion or event rather than merely convey information. Short (1996, p. 9) points out that when the authors write, "they use various kinds of knowledge which they share with the reader (linguistics, contextual, general world knowledge) in order to constrain the reader into interpreting what he or she reads in a particular way." Therefore, focusing on the formal features of a poem can lead to an ability to perceive its represented meaning.

In this poem-based lesson plan form-focused tasks lead students to discover the salient linguistic features of a text for themselves. The students possess objective evidence from the text that allows them to move on to more meaning-focused tasks for interpreting what the poem represents. According to Willis (2005, p. 9), tasks are "both the means by which this evidence is found and the context in which students discuss and negotiate their interpretations." Rosenkjar (2006, p. 129) concludes that when students learn that they can "use their existing knowledge of English to achieve a clear and solid understanding of a poem based on objective linguistic evidence that they are capable of discovering, they often become interested in poetry."

Teaching Poetry in EFL Classes
A balance between form-focus and meaning-focus is necessary for learners to acquire a second language and it is important to include poems in the ESL course syllabus and to teach them through lessons based on stylistic tasks. However, when the author of this paper asked her students what they thought of English poetry, they all "agreed" that English poems were

"difficult, boring and of little communicative value." The reason for such opinions was that the students' experience of English poems learning was based on the traditional grammar-translation method. In this lesson, Roethke's poem, "Child on top of a greenhouse", is used to demonstrate that poems can be interesting, motivating, and oriented to communication between writer and reader and among readers, and how this is achieved through tasks.

Tasks and Activities

Pre-reading schema-setting task
Before reading the poem students are guided to the topic of the poem by discussion questions based on their own experiences. Students are asked to bring their childhood photos to the class and ask each other questions and share opinions (see Appendix 2). After that the teacher introduces the poet (see Appendix 3) and the students are given a handout (see Appendix 4) to introduce new words like: *chrysanthemum; putty; plunge;* and *billow.* The students then read the poem. It is a non-task preparation activity.

Tasks during reading
After students have read the poem they analyze various grammatical features of the poem in a stylistic exercise (see Appendix 5).

Further activities based on the poem
Further activities (see Appendix 6) that focus on students' grammatical knowledge are done in pairs and small groups. As a result, students will be able to understand how the speaker felt, thought and perceived what was happening around him. While students work in pairs, the teacher acts as a language adviser and a monitor and encourages students to discover salient features of the text, as well as ensures students understand task instructions. This is an especially important role in mixed-ability classes.

Conclusion

This poem-based lesson plan was implemented in the classroom through task-based teaching where students were involved in learning through closed tasks, bottom-up processing, decision-making, problem solving, creative, and consciousness-raising tasks. This learning process required students to reach a single, correct solution in some of the tasks; involved understanding of the poem by analyzing words and sentences in the poem itself; and required the students to exchange opinions on the issues, and agree or disagree to a solution or problem.

Although the students were reluctant to participate actively at the beginning of the lesson, the teacher observed that they got really carried away by performing tasks through group and pair work. As a result, they were able to capture the essence of the poem and understand its meaning themselves. As part of the homework assignment, students were asked to bring their reflection papers to the next class. They were also asked to bring their favorite poems to the next class.

After having reviewed the reflection papers written by the students, it became clear that including poetry and literature in the curriculum would be effective for the students' oral second language proficiency. Moreover, the author of this paper realized that using a stylistic approach and managing the sequence of tasks throughout the lesson helped students to develop "the feeling for language" through the negotiation of tasks.

Although many teachers argue that Japanese students tend to be shy and unwilling to participate in group work, the opposite can be inferred based on the results of this lesson: if teachers create the "right" atmosphere for the class and choose appropriate tasks for the students' English level, it will definitely boost students' confidence so they can make the most of their language with all its shortcomings and inaccuracies. After all, "the success of a teaching program would be judged in terms of the learners' growing ability to use the language for communication" (Willis & Willis, p. 8, 2007).

Biographical Statement
Alexandra Shaitan has taught English to Japanese learners for the past ten years. She holds a Master's Degree in CITE (Curriculum, Instruction and Technology in Education) from Temple University Japan. She is recently teaching English at Chuo University. Her major research interests include task-based assessment, ESL academic writing, and content-based teaching.

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Appendix 1 - *Child on Top of a Greenhouse* by Theodore Roethke

The wind billowing out the seat of my britches,
My feet crackling splinters of glass and dried putty,
The half-grown chrysanthemums staring like accusers
Up through the streaked glass flashing with sunlight,
A few white clouds all rushing eastward,
A line of elms plunging and tossing like horses,
And everyone, everyone pointing up and shouting.

Appendix 2 - Pre-Reading Task

Discussion questions for students while introducing their childhood photos.

(a) What is the purpose of rules for children?
(b) How might children feel about breaking rules?
(c) Did you ever break a rule in your childhood? Were you punished for it?

Appendix 3

Theodore Roethke (1908-1963), who was born in Saginaw, Michigan, was an American poet whose lyrical verse is characterized by its startling imagery, especially of plant life. Roethke spent much of his childhood in and around a greenhouse that belonged to his father and uncle. There he developed a lifelong involvement with all manner of growing things which became the subject of his unusual imagery and of his ability to communicate to the reader the idea of the natural world as being a dynamic, often disturbing place, something more that just a setting for the actions of humanity.

Appendix 4

Divide the following list of words from the poem into groups and name each group.

horses	shouting	chrysanthemum
billowing	britches	plunging
everyone	flashing	accusers
crackling	feet	tossing
wind	rushing	sunlight
staring	glass	clouds
		pointing

Appendix 5 - Stylistic Exercise

The following instructions are given to students:

- Underline all the verbs associated with the speaker.
- Underline behaving verbs which refer to physiological actions and reactions.
- Highlight the last line in the poem. What is your interpretation of the repetition of *everyone* in this line?
-Describe the speaker's tone.

Appendix 6
Activity 1 (a sorting task based on the notion of lexical sets)
Divide the following list of words from the poem into two groups and then name each group. Explain the reason for your decision. Rate the emotional intensity of each word in the list (see Appendix 3).

Activity 2 (a problem solving or decision-making task)
Work with your partner. Decide how to divide the poem into two parts. What do you think each part represents? What do you think happened between the first and the second part?

Activity 3 (a problem solving task)
Answer the following questions and explain your answers:

- Who do you think the speaker is and what's the situation?
- Do you think the speaker in the poem is a boy or a girl, why?
- Why at the end of the poem is everyone pointing up and shouting?
- Could you note the location of the speaker?

Activity 4 (a decision-making task)
Work in pairs to answer the questions to the following tasks:

- Which line in the poem has the most/least emotional intensity?
- What does the speaker emphasize by repeating the word "up"?
- List all the words from the poem which express the sense of excitement and exhilaration.
- Why does the author use present participles in the poem?
- Where would you draw a center line in the poem? Why?

Activity 5 (a closed/convergent task)
Work in pairs and try to reach a single correct solution.

- How many grammatical sentences are in this poem?
- Do you see any metaphors in this poem? Why are they used in the poem? What value do they have?
- Do you see any semantic parallels in the poem?
- The author of "Child on top of a greenhouse" compares chrysanthemums to accusers because the chrysanthemums have seen:

a. *a storm coming*
b. *glass breaking*
c. *trees falling*
d. *that light cannot get through the dirty windows*

Activity 6 (a follow-up exploitation/creative activity)
a. Imagine you were a parent of the main character in this poem. What would you say to him/her? Write a short letter expressing your feelings to the main character reacting to his/her behavior?
b. Imagine you were the main character in the poem. What would you say to your parents? How would you explain your behavior? Why were you behaving that way? Write a short letter to your parents.