

Promoting and Developing English Conversation Skills at Tertiary Level : a Process Approach in a Traditional Setting

Hyun, Taeduck & Finch, A. E. (1997).
English Teaching (Korea) 52(3), 47-65

Abstract

Given the current emphasis on English conversation at all levels of education in Korea, this paper investigates how valid and authentic opportunities for communicative use of the target language might be offered, using Task-based methods and ideas in a traditional setting. Current teaching styles in Secondary education in Korea would need to be significantly changed if a complete shift to a Process approach were made, so this paper suggests how the present learning environment might become fertile soil into which the seed of Task-based theory might be planted. Such a proposed progression from Propositional to Process attitudes would be facilitated by sequenced use of language tasks in the classroom, according to characteristics such as linguistic/communicative complexity, information content, and learning-level. In this manner, authentic English Conversation would emerge from the present system, and would in doing so help to transform it, preserving that which is appropriate, and substituting a new authenticity for that which has had its day.

I. INTRODUCTION

Language is culture in motion. It is people interacting with people. the most effective programs will be those that involve the whole learner in the experience of language as a network of relations between people, things, and events. (Savignon, 1983:187)

It is a general truism that examinations determine what is learned in the classroom, and in Korea the present focus on scientific testing of English in Secondary education (e.g. objective testing of grammatical knowledge via multiple-choice questions), in conjunction with the real need for students to attain high scores in TOEIC and TOEFL tests at Tertiary level, produces students who tend to possess considerable knowledge of the infrastructure of the target language, but whose oral skills are largely still in their infancy. It is after all impractical and unreasonable to expect teachers to attempt any subjective assessment of individual conversation skills with class sizes of 40 and above, and the overwhelming responsibility of helping their students to produce concrete results for non-conversational tests leaves little

time for application and practice of the language in authentic settings. Thus students attending institutes of further education, having become accustomed to the traditional methodology which is employed in the acquisition of such knowledge-based learning, usually bring with them a number of interacting and mutually reinforcing learning problems deriving from it, including rote-oriented preferred learning styles, strictly defined classroom roles, lack of confidence in their oral abilities, lack of awareness regarding learning strategies, and family/school pressures to produce visible results (a strong influence on individual learning agendas).

One solution to this complex tangle might be to rewrite (or to supplement) these examinations, and to have a system of Oral tests which would then require educators to prepare their students to be able to perform well in them, and such tests have been in existence in Hong Kong for a number of years, with precisely this result. However, original attitudes to learning persist, and rote-learning of conversations can be the norm. Therefore this paper addresses the overall question of how to promote fluency and language usage in the situation as it is in Korea, and thereby to gradually alter such perceptions in favour of a view of language as a means of communication rather than as a mathematical code. A Process-Syllabus approach is proposed, in which learner training, language awareness, and the development of learner autonomy are actively promoted via sequenced language tasks, in which grammar is seen as the carrier of meaning, and not as the message itself. The consequent necessity for learners to use the target language to communicate needs, opinions, and information, along with gradual involvement in decision-making, syllabus design, and the setting and appraisal of learning goals, can then be seen to improve student motivation, thus encouraging positive attitudes to learning, acceptance of responsibility for learning, and a desire to continue studying after the relevant course has finished.

Within any learning framework however, are the essential questions of how to take into account matters such as differences between methodological theory and practice, how and what students actually learn in the classroom (and what relationship this has with learning materials and teaching aims), and how to deal with large ranges of ability. In this context, the sequenced task-based format attempts to produce a learning environment which is adaptable to the changing demands of the participants, by providing a learning-centered classroom in which roles, perceptions and expectations gradually evolve in a positive and autonomous manner, and in which communicative competence and negotiation of meaning take priority. Problems referred to earlier then lose much of their significance, since the learning path is negotiated and discovered by teacher and students together, and since there are fewer stipulated pedagogical restrictions or requirements to be interpreted (or rejected!) by them.

Such changes in attitudes to learning imply other alterations to pre-existing ideas and practices regarding classroom management, teacher/student roles, language awareness, evaluation and assessment, and authenticity of interaction, but these are mostly consequent to the main shift to task-based learning, and do not need to be imposed per se before this can occur. Instead, adoption of language tasks in the classroom, along with student involvement in assessment of the results of these activities, allows them to occur naturally as the outcome of the need to communicate. Therefore it is not proposed that a new cult methodology be adopted, supplanting earlier ones, and necessitating extensive (and time-consuming) re-training of personnel. Instead, it is suggested that within the present educational system, a simple change of emphasis from the what to the how of English language study might bring forth significant results in terms of the desired development of students conversational skills, and that associated matters of teacher-development would be facilitated by this change.

II. Syllabus design - Proposition vs Process

Current educational debate regarding syllabus design can be seen as the interaction of four main syllabus types (Formal, Functional, Task-based, Process), each representing and expressing distinctive views on the nature of language, its manner of presentation, and how it should be worked upon for learning. In answering the question of "What does a learner of a new language need to know, and what does a learner need to be able to do with this knowledge?" (Breen, 1987:85), these alternatives come to fruition in the classroom as a realization of one of two main underlying ideologies: i)

Propositional syllabi (Formal and Functional types); and ii) Process syllabi (Task-based and Process types), the former concentrating on the internalization of grammar coupled with the exercise of linguistic skills in a motor-perceptual manipulation (usage) (Widdowson, 1987), and the latter approaching learning goals through addressing how communicative competence may be promoted via learning tasks. Thus Propositional syllabi use structures, rules, and schemas, in their mapping out of a required knowledge of language performance, and it is this knowledge that is the learning goal. Process plans on the other hand, approach learning goals through addressing how communicative competence may be promoted via learning tasks, along with attention to matters of how to learn, and how to communicate, representing a change in three areas:

- i. a view of communicative competence as the undertaking and achievement of a range of tasks;
- ii. reliance on the contribution of the learners in the mobilization of the linguistic competence which they might bring to the task;
- iii. emphasis on the learning process as appropriate content during language learning;

(Breen, 1987:161).

These changes inherent in the Process approach also imply alterations to the learning environment, based on practicalities of facilitating student participation, motivation and awareness of learning strategies:

	Expected Learning Environment	Proposed Learning Environment
i.	Teacher as "fount of wisdom", disseminator of knowledge, mentor, possessing "correct" answers	Teacher as facilitator and promoter of learning, advisor, counsellor.
ii.	Learner as passive recipient of knowledge.	Learner as active participant in the learning process, designer of his/her own learning path.
iii.	Teacher-centred classroom.	Learner-centred classroom.
iv.	Classroom in a traditional layout, with lines of individual desks facing the front of the classroom.	Desks arranged in groups, learners facing each other
v.	Teacher directs from the front of the classroom.	Teacher circulates from group to group, with no focal point of attention.
vi.	Teacher designs a course based on his/her evaluation of the learners.	Learners and teacher negotiate a course of study in an ongoing way.
vii.	Teacher selects and presents materials, controlling the sequence and rate of study.	Teacher and learners negotiate selection of materials, and learners determine their own rate of study.
viii.	Traditional learning techniques (rote, repetition, etc.).	Examination of learning strategies, identification of those appropriate to individual learners.
ix.	Language learning as a code, attention to discrete units, on the assumption that mastery of these will result in knowledge of the language.	Language learning as a complex process, a mixture of various factors. Development of communicative competence.
x.	Language as the acquisition of separate skills.	Study of language in an integrated manner - more than the sum of its parts.
xi.	Lack of attention to appropriacy of utterances.	Attention to sociolinguistic competence.
xii.	Grammar-based materials, usually written specifically to illustrate the	Authentic materials, reflecting the use of the language in a "real-life" context.

	teaching aim.			
xiii.	Disconnected exercises, mostly at sentence level.	single-item	Task-based dealing with the whole language.	problem-solving activities with the whole language. Communication of meaning.
xiv.	Teacher identifies and immediately corrects learner errors. Errors seen as "mistakes" in the acquisition of the code.		Learner errors only important when seen as impeding communication. Peer correction.	
xv.	Teacher assesses the learners.		Learners assess their own progress and that of their peers, in conjunction with the teacher.	
xvi.	Learning goals determined by the teacher and achieved or not by the learners at the end of the course.		Learning as an ongoing process, to be continued after the course has finished.	

Table 1.1. Projected changes in the learning environment

As an example of the Process approach, the Task-based syllabus thus concerns itself with both needs and means. Knowledge and abilities are tackled in a problem-based format, involving the learner in identification of learning difficulties and in reflection on how to deal with them effectively. Methodology used is largely an outcome of the application of existing techniques within the context of a different weighting and sequencing (Willis & Willis, 1996), and the teacher is still an essential element of the classroom and of the decision-making process, assisting the learners in the identification, selection and monitoring of aims, strategies, and processes; for it takes better teachers to focus on the learner, and as Corder (1990:116) observes:

- the teachers become more, not less, important. Tasks may involve relatively little in the way of written or spoken material. The talk which goes on in the classroom, is the major source of input. You cant do without the teacher.

The division of language according to lexis and grammar are not excluded from the Task-based format however, but appear in a different context of authentic communication of meaning, and as factors in social constructs, produced interdependently in classrooms by teachers and learners (Stern, 1984), who perform the normal procedures of syllabus design together in the classroom in an ongoing and adaptive way, using a bank of classroom activities which are themselves made up of sets of tasks (Breen, 1987); a situation remarked

upon by Corder (1990:115) when interviewed by Allwright:

- Dick Allwright: "Doesn't this mean that it is not possible to provide a syllabus of tasks, but only a bank of them? One has to rely on the teachers perception of what is right for their learners at a given point in their development."
- Pit Corder: "I think that's right. Teachers are going to have a much more responsible role, because they're going to have to make decisions about what is right for a group of learners at that time, instead of simply working through a book."

II.i Practical Considerations

Recent research in language teaching has identified a number of contributory factors to learning, apart from considerations of syllabus design and teaching methodology. Among these are the importance of the learner in his/her own learning process (Long, 1983), the reinterpretation of the syllabus by the teacher and the learners (Breen, 1984:), and the self-perception of the teachers as being primarily responsible for all curricular tasks except that of grouping learners (Bartlett & Butler, 1985). Allwright & Bailey (1991:28) further make the point that:

- Learners do not learn directly from the syllabus. They learn, partly, from whatever becomes of the syllabus in the classroom, but they can learn from other things that happen too. we must study the processes that are responsible for what happens in our classrooms.

They consequently place great importance on the management of learning, which they see as vital in order to give everyone the best chance of learning the language through managed interaction. In choosing to co-operate, the learners make a significant contribution to the management of the interaction that takes place in the classroom. This co-operation is in itself part of the learning process, being an acknowledgement of the classroom environment as providing opportunities for reflection and comment in terms of communicative effectiveness and social appropriateness, and requiring a number of factors to be managed and negotiated, preferably by the students themselves, and in the target language (adapted from Allwright & Bailey, 1991:19):

- who gets to speak? (turn-taking)
- what do they talk about? (content, topic)
- what will each participant do with the various opportunities to speak? (task)
- what sort of atmosphere is created? (tone)
- what accent, dialect, or language is used? (code).

Recognition of these extra considerations, in addition to blurring divisions between curriculum, syllabus, and methodology, is indicative of a greater awareness of learner integrity, and of a need to place the learner at the center of the educational process, so that the learners themselves should exercise their own responsibility in the choice of learning objectives, content and methods as well in determining the means used to assess their performance (Brindley, 1984).

However, part of the issue under consideration, and a fundamental question to be addressed in the area of classroom management, is the effect (and advisability) of introducing a new approach to learning English, given the existence of factors such as pre-existing learning expectations, a strong educational and cultural background based on the Propositional learning paradigm, and lack of classroom time. Thus, from a practical point of view, it is important to pose searching questions regarding the necessity and efficacy of these changes: Who are they for?, Do we really need them?, Why?, and What are the justifications?, for as Tarone & Yule (1989:9) observe, if students who are used to the Formal style of learning:

- are thrust into much more informal setting in which the teacher assumes a less authoritarian role, expects interactive group work among students, does not encourage memorization or administer achievement tests, and generally acts as if students should be responsible for their own learning, then they may feel that their teacher just doesn't know how to do the job properly.

Furthermore, not only does innovation need sensitive handling, but it is a contradiction in terms to impose a learner-centered approach (Bolitho, 1990), however certain the teacher/syllabus designer might be about its appropriateness. It is important rather that part of the shared decision-making is in fact an evaluation of the students perception of the innovation itself, through activities such as learning diaries, interviews, peer appraisal, questionnaires, and ranking and rating scales. It is the students after all who are primarily affected by the necessary deskilling and reskilling involved (White, Martin, Stimson & Hodge, 1991). Any curriculum/syllabus innovation will also have considerable effect on teachers, who will be resistant to change unless involved in the decision-making process.

III. Sequencing Tasks

- Tasks lend themselves to stimulating, intellectually challenging materials, especially those of a problem-solving nature, and of a kind which seem meaningful to teachers planning and implementing lessons (Long, 1990:36).

Given the present lack of conversational English skills in Tertiary students in Korea, the

approach advocated is to tackle this problem gradually, taking present learner-expectations as a starting point, rather than trying to replace them with unfamiliar practices based on even more unfamiliar concepts. New attitudes to learning are instead allowed to evolve in the classroom, while students are encouraged via the Task-based format to optimize their learning opportunities and to at least begin to become autonomous learners. One means of providing such an environment is to construct a learning-bank of communicative problem-based activities (see Prabhu, 1987), which students can use as a starting point for further progress. However, it must be recognised that this will be the first experience of such an approach for the majority of students, and that they will feel more assured of its educational validity if it is seen to grow out of currently accepted norms. As Corder (1990) points out, success in language-learning is nothing to do with people's innate ability to learn a second language, but has to do with variations in motivation, attitude, and so on; that's where the variation is, and any attempt to help students maximize their learning potential must therefore examine methods of positively affecting such factors, recognizing that current perceptions can be a valuable starting point from which to grow.

Given therefore that students cannot (and should not) be expected to take on such changes at the drop of a hat, it is proposed that a learning-bank might be presented in a manner sufficiently flexible to incorporate a Propositional approach to its use in the early stages. The simple use of tasks does not guarantee success or learning efficiency, after all, and in order to provide a springboard for development which would promote familiarity with the concept of Task-based learning and which would provide a linear progression of activities in which learning in the traditional sense could be seen to be occurring, tasks could be presented in a sequence reflecting their status and purpose, and learning could then be observed in the development of oral skills along a such a path of graded tasks.

In this context, Brown et al. (1984) distinguish between static and dynamic tasks. Static tasks involve simple transmission of information in a linear sequence, often using easily prescribed language (e.g. where is it?), while dynamic tasks involve the speakers in two-way conversations in which language is not prescribed, and in which relations may vary (e.g. telling a story). Nation (1990) further differentiates between: experience tasks (using the learners previous experience); shared tasks (getting learners to help each other bridge the learning gap); guided tasks (providing support while learners perform the task, by giving exercises and focused guidance); and independent tasks (in which learners work alone without planned help). Combining these, we can produce a table of task-types which deal in different ways with the gap between the learners present knowledge and the demands of the learning task. This table can then allow us to select and sequence activities according to their learning characteristics:

	static	dynamic
experience tasks	memory games review activities (one-way) lexis activities	brainstorming free-talking discussions review activities (two-way)
shared tasks	pair-work (prepositions, descriptions, instructions) group-work (one-way)	pair-work (interviews) group-work (two-way) jigsaw activities pyramid activities role-plays simulations error-correction peer-assessment
guided tasks	classroom English lexis activities (discovering meaning, new vocabulary) structural activities (drills) questionnaires (one-way) comprehension dictation	questionnaires (two-way)
independent tasks	Homework, independent evaluation questionnaires/accessing information from members of the class.	ongoing evaluation

Table 2: Task-types

Further classification can be made according to Candlin's (1987) list of factors determining the difficulty (and therefore the sequencing) of tasks (i - vi), and to Anderson & Lynch's (1988) extension of this list (vii - xii):

- i) cognitive load;
- ii) communicative stress;
- iii) particularity and generalizability;
- iv) code complexity and interpretative density;
- v) content continuity;
- vi) process continuity

- vii) the sequence in which the information is presented;
- viii) the familiarity of the listener with the topic;
- ix) the explicitness of the information contained in the text;
- x) the type of input;
- xi) the type and scope of the task to be carried out;
- xii) the amount of support provided to the listener (speaker).

Thus teachers and students can be presented with a series of activities sequenced according to the above considerations, and can follow this, confident that new content is being presented, practised, and performed (a methodology used by the British Council), according to established educational tenets. However, recent research has questioned the link between linguistic predictions of difficulty and what learners actually do find difficult (Nunan, 1988), and an important aspect of this gradual introduction of the Process ethos is that students are given the freedom to select activities seen to be appropriate to learning needs and difficulties as identified by themselves, performing such activities according to the needs of the group rather than the class. Thus within any particular Unit of the learning bank, different groups can be working on different activities, and progressing onto new ones at their own speed. This allows students to set learning objectives according to their own preferred learning rate, and to determine factors regarding the assimilation of new content matter. Some groups will therefore concentrate on static/guided tasks (e.g. example dialogues or activities which are essentially substitution drills), and this will be what is perceived by them as desirable. Other groups will pass over such activities, and will choose to perform more dynamic shared activities, which will stretch their capabilities accordingly. From this situation, they can (with the teachers counselling) move onto more independent tasks, developing and following-up the activities in a project-based format, designing their own materials, and performing more extended tasks relevant to their needs and abilities. In this way, oral skills are promoted according to the appropriate needs of the learner, instead of being applicable to a small minority at either end of the learning scale.

IV Example activities

For an example of how this process (i.e. using tasks to move from Propositional learner-expectations to a Process attitude to learning) might be employed in reality, a sample Unit from 'Tell Me About It' (Finch & Hyun, 1997) is used. In this Unit ('Food & Restaurants'), a Notional/Functional topic is set, and tasks are presented in a manner which allows a traditional interpretation. However, it is important to note that the successful carrying out of these tasks involves changes in classroom management, and that the sequencing of the tasks encourages the learner to progress along a project-based path which has free-talking as its

final aim. It could even be claimed that the development of learner-awareness along this route is one of the tasks itself - one which begins in a guided/static manner, and which takes on more dynamic/shared characteristics as it evolves.

Thus the first activity in the Unit ('How many Foods?') is a discovery activity, in which students brainstorm their own pre-existing vocabulary and share this with members of their group, and then with other groups. A quite controlled (static/experience) exercise therefore grows into a shared exploration of vocabulary, and students are encouraged to be more self-confident about their present level of achievement.

The second activity ('Tell Me About It') is still static, with set questions and answers, and aims to deal with a difficult and recurring problem (prepositions of location) by placing it in the context of the topic for the Unit. This activity, which has less scope for development than the previous one, might well be placed at the beginning of the Unit, but one of the aims of the book is to encourage students to question and evaluate, in preparation for their own freer selection of tasks appropriate to their needs.

The third and fifth activities ('Fast Food', 'At the Restaurant') are model dialogues (static/guided), which are essentially substitution drills, preparing for the freer activities to come. Students need to feel that their language-learning is valid and valuable, and for those lacking confidence in their ability to converse, such a beginning is a good starting point from which to examine the language. While some groups concentrate on these models therefore, others will move on to activity four ('Favorite Foods'), a questionnaire (static/shared - dynamic/shared) which takes a normal question/answer format, but involves the students by asking them to devise the questions. From this quite structured starting point there are many follow-up possibilities (reports, interviews, role-plays), in which authenticity can be promoted, and in which students can be given the opportunity to think about their learning needs and strategies for achieving these.

This theme continues in the next activity ('Making a Menu'), in which the task, the purpose, and the setting, are all dynamic/independent, necessitating communicative use of the target language in order to fulfill the requirements of designing a menu. Such an exercise can easily grow into other language tasks and projects, (either at the teachers suggestion, or as instigated by the students) such as role-play, drama, reports, and presentations.

A 'Teachers Resource Book' is part of the learning bank, and provides the teacher with a collection of activities to which s/he (in the role of facilitator) can refer when appropriate. In this Unit, cards are supplied showing pictures of foods and definitions of these according to

the containers used. Various card games can thus be initiated, and will focus on the teaching aim of food containers as they are performed. Here again, activities can be sequenced at the teachers prompting, beginning with simple match games, and moving on to more complex sentence structures with more interesting games, finally arriving at free speech and student-designed (dynamic/independent) games.

Teachers Notes are supplied in which explanations and suggested methods of performing the activities are given, based upon the underlying idea that the teacher, rather than being an all-knowing 'mentor', ...

- lets nothing else be learned than - learning. His conduct therefore, often produces the impression that we properly learn nothing from him, if by learning we .. understand the procurement of useful information. The teacher is ahead of his students in this alone, that he still has far more to learn than they - he has to learn to let them learn (Heidegger, 1954:74, reprinted in Rogers, 1983:18).

This concept is central to the use of the book, and though it might involve a 'leap of faith' in some cases, it is certain that every teacher will want to espouse the cause of learning, just as every English classroom these days claims to be communicative. It is simply a shift in emphasis and definition that is required.

V. Conclusion

The gradual introduction of innovative concepts and practices is an important aspect of the proposed approach, given the strong educational and cultural backgrounds of the students. Thus the security of being able to taste the new, while having the old still available makes changes in learning styles less frightening, while providing a reference point against which to make comparative evaluations and to assess learning. Initial levels and attitudes to learning are taken as a starting point, and students and teachers are encouraged to explore the freedom to select and develop activities from that point. Hence it is suggested that within the present educational system, use of a Task-based format with a learning bank of structured activities in the English language classroom, would encourage in those concerned, at the very least a planting of a seed, and a shooting of that seed to produce effective and lasting growth in the development of oral skills. Students would be encouraged to make meaningful utterances in the target language, to perceive that learning strategies can produce valid results, to successfully communicate and negotiate meaning, and to improve their oral performance according to their own criteria. We must prepare them after all for a new millennium, in which the goal of education must surely be the facilitation of change and learning, since it is not knowledge, but the process of seeking knowledge which gives a base for security. We

must be ready to assess strengths and weaknesses in our educational system, and to change it accordingly, preparing our future citizens for the road ahead by enabling them with the learning skills necessary to take the country forward in what will surely be an era of change and development. For this, we need people who can communicate easily and fluently by phone, in the international market place, or on the Internet, rather than being able to answer complex but largely irrelevant decontextualized and unauthentic multiple choice questions.

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