
Task-based Teaching in a Traditional Setting: Understanding the Students

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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 skills could be developed within the present system, and in doing so would help to transform it, preserving that which is appropriate, while promoting use of English in a meaningful context.

PRESENT SYSTEM

The purpose of this presentation is to illustrate how modern EFL teaching methods can be used within the educational framework which is currently found in Korean secondary schools, and which produces students with traditional learning preferences in post-secondary education. We would also like to explain what induced us to opt for a task-based approach for our students and for our in-service Korean English teacher-training courses.

Various studies have looked at the problem of large classes, but we would like to investigate the input of the English teacher, and to suggest a way in which students can be assisted in the development of their oral skills, without drastically confronting or opposing their learning environment.

We all know the dangers of comparing cultures in the language classroom. Comparison leads to value judgements, which in turn lead to dissatisfaction. The same is true if we try to impose a new teaching methodology on students whose daily diet is a traditional style of learning. We are not helping them by implying that our methods are better than the ones they have experienced for the whole of their learning life. Instead, it is possible to integrate and to introduce new ways and means gradually. The workshop part of the presentation therefore tries to demonstrate how a task-based methodology can in fact be placed into the present framework, inputting authentic opportunities for use of the English language.

Before the workshop begins however, I would like to say a few words about the learning experience of Korean students. As native speakers, it is normal to see the result of this process rather than the actuality, so I would like to share my knowledge of what our students have been through.

As students in secondary and post-secondary education, we are under great pressure to produce results and these affect the rest of our lives. We therefore work long and hard to achieve those results,

and to get into the right University. When I was a middle school student I heard my teacher saying that if I slept 3 hours a day, I would pass, but if 4 hours a day, I would fail. I think this is true of these days. You have also probably met students who sleep in libraries, and rarely go home. This is our reality -- a continuous round of rote learning, trying to absorb as many facts as possible for a continuous round of examinations. Thus there is little chance to take up a hobby, or to develop a skill such as conversation in another language. Our education comes through our eyes, and not through our lips. We read and learn, read and learn.

Let me give you a brief introduction of how one textbook lesson is taught in English class at secondary schools. This is what I heard from English teachers who take my course given at the graduate school of education. One lesson is divided into six or seven periods. Listening to the tape recorder and doing some tasks, comprehension of the main reading, comprehension checkup, dialogue drills, analysing and practising language form, class activity, and exercises. Most of the teaching is done in Korean, not in the target language, and even in dialogue drills students just memorize the whole dialogue and some are asked to act it out in the front as they have learned it by heart. There is no real communication. Class activities will be a good chance for communicative drill. However teachers do not prepare for it in advance, and merely ask students to practise as directed in the text. Again, there is no real communication. In one word Korean English teachers advocate a text-based teaching/learning. There is no other preparation than the text.

One result of this situation is that our view of language learning is affected by the general methodology, so that we tend to see language as a collection of discrete facts to be learned, memorized, and repeated without meaning. This situation will be understood when you know how pre-teacher training is done at universities. They spend most of their time in studying linguistics and literature and spend less time in developing English proficiency. They take some methodology courses. However, these courses pay attention only to theories. Even if teaching practice is a required course, no practical teaching techniques are taught. Therefore most teachers teach English as they were taught as secondary school students. The teacher training curriculum is partially to blame for this. When I ask teachers to prepare communicative activities for their class, they simply say they do not know how to prepare them and they do not have enough time to do so.

Having been through this system, I am now in a position to affect it in a small way, and to do this from within, by training future generations of teachers. If they can bring a different view of language-learning into the classroom, then whatever the restrictions, the situation will gradually change.

Professor Finch and I had workshops, similar to today's workshop, with secondary school English teachers at the Kyongbuk Teacher Training Center. Most teachers showed great interest in a task-based approach. They are hungry for new techniques and communicative materials. We have to help teachers in this matter.

Thus we advocate a task-based approach for the students, as an authentic and interesting way of motivating them. A new curriculum was introduced this year at my university. Every student must take English conversation courses for three years. This helps us to apply a task-based approach for my students who have been accustomed to a traditional style of learning.

Finally, while asking that language teachers be sensitive to the learning culture in which they find themselves, I would also like to ask that they do not reproduce it! We need new ideas and methods, so that we can go forward. If native speakers fall back on grammar and code-based teaching, the students will simply be getting more of the same. However, they need stimulation, motivation, and enjoyment.

When I interview prospective employees, I ask "Who does the talking in your classroom, you or the students?" The students need to speak and to use English. This must be our primary aim.

EXPLANATION AND WORKSHOP: SEQUENCING OF 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 p. 36).

Given the present lack of conversational English skills in post-secondary 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: (a) experience tasks (using the learners previous experience); (b) shared tasks (getting learners to help each other bridge the learning gap); (c) guided tasks (providing support while learners perform the task, by giving exercises and focused guidance); and (d) independent tasks (in which learners work alone without planned help).

Combining these, we can produce a table of task-types (see Table 1, next page) 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.

Further classification can be made according to Candlin's (1987) list of factors determining the difficulty (and therefore the sequencing) of tasks (1-6), and to Anderson & Lynch's (1988) extension of this list (7-12):

1. cognitive load
2. communicative stress
3. particularity and generalizability
4. code complexity and interpretative density
5. content continuity

6. process continuity
7. the sequence in which the information is presented
8. the familiarity of the listener with the topic
9. the explicitness of the information contained in the text
10. the type of input
11. the type and scope of the task to be carried out
12. 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

TABLE 1
TASK-TYPES

	static	dynamic
experience tasks	*memory games review activities (one-way) *lexis activities	*brainstorming *free-talking *discussions *review activities (two-way)
shared tasks	*pair-work (one-way - fixed language) group-work (one-way)	*pair-work (two-way - eg interviews) *group-work (two-way) *jigsaw activities *pyramid activities *role-plays *simulations *peer-error-correction *peer-assessment
guided tasks	*classroom English *lexis activities (e.g. discovering meaning new vocabulary) *structural activities (drills) *questionnaires (one-way) *comprehension activities *dictation activities	*questionnaires (two-way) *obtaining/sharing information that has/leads to various outcomes and allows various uses of the language
independent tasks	*homework *independent evaluation via question sheets *individual questionnaires accessing controlled information from others in the class	*ongoing self/group-evaluation *materials design (making activities inventing games designing questionnaires undertaking projects)

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). Other groups will pass over such activities, and will choose to perform more dynamic shared activities. 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.

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 shown in the appendix. 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. Indeed, 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 preexisting 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, and 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. Therefore, while some groups concentrate on these models, 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.

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 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 also 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, 1983 p. 18).

This concept is central to the use of tasks, 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.

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 unimaginable 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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APPENDIX: SAMPLE ACTIVITIES

How Many Foods?

Genre: 4 exercises - group activity
Materials: pencil/paper
Language: discovery learning

How many types of food can we think of?
Do we know the names in English?
In your group.....

1. Choose one type of food (Fruit, Vegetables, Meat/Seafood, Others)
2. Everybody write down all the food names your group can think of.
3. Change groups. (Your teacher will help you.)
4. Share your ideas with the people in the new group.
5. Change groups.
6. Share your ideas. Fill up your sheet with all four types of foods.



1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____
13. _____
14. _____
15. _____

Tell Me About It

Genre: Film
Materials: pencil/paper
Language: discovery - location, shape, preparation

Student A: Tell student B how to draw the picture on this page.
Student B: Listen to Student A. Draw the picture in the empty space on the next page. You can ask questions ("Where?" "How big?" "How many?")



Fast Food

Group: *4 to 6*
 Materials: *pen/pencil*
 Language: *Requesting, suggestion*

Here is a model dialogue:
 1) Practice it with your partner.
 2) Then try the alternative dialogues.

A: Welcome to McDon. Can I help you?
 B: Yes. I'd like a *cheeseburger and french fries*.
 A: Certainly. Do you want anything to drink with that?
 B: Yes please. I'll have a *cola*.
 A: Okay. A *cheeseburger, french fries, and a cola*.
 For here or to go?
 B: To go please.
 A: That's *three dollars fifty cents (\$3.50)* please.
 B: Fine. Here you are.

Now try the dialogue again with different items.
 Choose from these:

Hamburger	Salad	Diet Coke
Hot Dog	Coke slaw	Coke
Chicken Wings	Breads	Sprite
Tacos	Corn	Lemon and
Hot Sandwiches	French fries	lemon coffee
Fries	Apple pie	Coffee
		Milk

\$5.20	\$4.60
\$7.25	\$6.70
\$18.00	\$12.20

Favorite Foods

Group: *4 to 6*
 Materials: *pen/pencil*
 Language: *Question - providing information*

What food do people like best?
 Let's make a questionnaire.
 In your group.....

- 1) Each person, think of three questions, (e.g. "Do you like curry?")
- 2) Write them down below.
- 3) Each person interviews at least ten people (not from your group).
- 4) Share the results with the people in your group.
- 5) Write down the results from your group.
- 6) Change groups. Share your ideas.

What is the favorite food of the class?
 What is the most favorite food of the class?

	Yes	No	Maybe
1)			
2)			
3)			
4)			
5)			
6)			
7)			
8)			
9)			
10)			
11)			
12)			

Menu

Making a Menu

Group: *4 to 6*
 Materials: *pen/pencil*
 Language: *Requesting, suggestion*

You are going to make a menu table.
 So we need to decide some items.

- 1) What type of restaurant?
- 2) What is the name of the restaurant? (top of next page)
- 3) What food will you offer for "breakfast"? (next page)
- 4) What food will you offer for "lunch/dinner"? (next page)
- 5) What food will you offer for "dessert"? (next page)
- 6) What drinks will you offer? (next page)

In your group, divide up these questions, and write your decisions on the reference page.

Try to make a menu table, with a restaurant name and customers. Try to make it interesting. Perhaps the restaurant doesn't have one of the items.

"I'm sorry, we don't have any drinks every night."
 "I'm sorry, we're out of pasta every night."

Dessert

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)
- 5)

Drinks

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)
- 5)