Task Based Learning and Oral Production in EFL Reading Classes

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Abstract

In Japan, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) holds its own place of importance in tertiary English education. However, with a recent lean towards more communicative learning styles, the effects of using task based activities to teach reading in communicative learning environments are yet to be fully comprehended. This paper examines strategies for the teaching of reading in such classrooms. The effectiveness, benefits and suitability of using communicative based activities in such teaching contexts are also discussed. This study arrives at the conclusion that finding the appropriate methodology for the context should achieve precedence over trying to meld current teaching trends into classroom practices irrespective of their suitability, both for the learner and for the teacher.

Keywords : English, Japan, education, task based, learning, teaching, oral, reading

1 . Introduction

The teaching of reading in the modern English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context can present its share of both opportunities and tribulations. Many private schools and other places of learning in Japan have recently placed a strong emphasis on 'communicative' language teaching. How can the demands of an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) reading curriculum be reconciled with a culture of teaching that lays strong emphasis on oral communication? Also, how can encouraging oral production in EAP reading classes be an effective use of precious teaching time? These are questions that need to be considered for all EAP reading instructors in Japan.

In this paper, reading instruction was the main focus due to the widely held belief that it is the most important academic skill (Grabe & Stroller, 2001). However, it is often afforded the least amount of time and focus in an integrated curriculum. The literature review will start

by considering a number of reading techniques and strategies that have been proposed for use in EFL situations. The use of tasks in the EFL classroom and their outcomes will then be highlighted. Definitions and requirements that have been put forward for an effective task will be introduced and some of the claims regarding the efficacy of Task Based Learning (TBL) in general language education will be considered. Specific literature that sheds light on the effectiveness of the use of tasks in second language (L2) reading instruction will be reviewed. Finally, 'focus on form' will be addressed and also its relevance in TBL and EFL situations.

The third part of this paper will describe a teaching context some instructors operate in. This section will attempt to illuminate the various factors such as class size, equipment levels, and layout that contribute to the physical teaching environment. Non-physical elements including course design, academic level, and school hierarchy that can also have an impact on the teaching situation will be discussed.

In the fourth section, the interaction of how EAP reading strategies, the theories of task based learning, and the goals of a communicative based teaching culture interact in the classroom will be analysed. Reasons for focusing on the use of tasks in the teaching context will be explained and finally the successes and difficulties faced in combining these approaches in classrooms with often contradictory goals and methods will be considered.

２．Literature Review

In this section, let us look at some of the strategies that have been proposed for the teaching of EAP reading in an EFL context. Due to constraints of size and scope, discussions regarding definitions of reading or successful readers will not be covered. However, before continuing with reading strategies and tasks, the term 'communicative teaching' needs clarifying.

The communicative approach to language teaching is dependent on the notion that communicating in the target language is the primary goal (Celce-Murcia, 2001). This communication can involve reading, writing, speaking and listening. For the purposes of this paper, when discussing communication activities in the classroom the reference will be toward speaking, or 'oral production', unless otherwise stated.

Grabe and Stoller (2001) list ten requirements for teachers of EAP reading. These include building up a student's vocabulary, demonstrating the principles of discourse-organization, increasing comprehension skills, producing strategic readers, giving students adequate opportunities for reading, and motivating students to read. Among the strategies for building vocabulary that Grabe and Stoller recommend, is the practice of highlighting key words

and recycling those key words throughout the course. They also suggest teaching self-study techniques for students to learn new vocabulary on their own using dictionaries and making word lists or index cards. Neither of those strategies are particularly suited to communication based tasks. However, for the instruction of discourse-organization principles, Grabe and Stoller advocate text-analysis activities. These can include the discussion of jumbled up paragraphs and the analysis of the function of each paragraph to determine its place or role in the piece of writing. Similarly, some of the techniques for producing strategic readers, such as summarizing a text verbally and orally explaining the strategies they are employing, include a speaking element. Techniques for motivating students can also involve oral production. For example, Grabe and Stoller suggest discussing the importance of reading and using pre-reading activities to increase the students' interest in and enjoyment of reading. These pre-reading activities can take the form of verbally predicting or imagining the story based on the title or visual image. As some of these activities could contain a sizeable element of oral production they will be considered in greater depth later in the fourth section of this paper.

In her discussion of communicative reading and writing in Asian settings, Shih (2011) suggests that traditional English language instruction views reading and writing in itself as a form of language study. Thereby, rather than considering reading and writing as a means of acquiring or communicating information and ideas, there is a tendency to see written English as a puzzle that needs to be solved word-by-word. Shih therefore discusses some methods and strategies that she views as particularly suited to encouraging a communicative reading and writing approach in Asia. The use of time limits is recommended to prevent students from trying to understand every individual word and to aim for a comprehension of the text as a whole. As a follow-up activity to extensive reading outside of class, Shih advocates oral reports in class for students to retell and communicate the story to their classmates. One final method mentioned is the use of thematic lessons on topics relevant to the students and pre/post group discussions based on the theme in question. The utilization of some of these methods in the Japanese classroom will be discussed in section four. However, it is important to recognize that any one single set of strategies cannot be said to fit uniformly over an area as large and diverse as Asia.

Next definitions of what actually qualifies as a 'task' will be considered. Ellis (2009) gives 4 criteria that must be present in a teaching activity to qualify as a task:

    1. The main focus must be on semantic and pragmatic meaning.

    2. The presence of an 'information gap'.

    3. Learner reliance on their own resources to complete the activity.

4. An outcome independent of simply utilizing the target language.

Ellis also makes a clear distinction between tasks and situational grammar exercises. The key point of differentiation is that a task has to include all of the above characteristics. A situational grammar exercise, on the other hand, does not satisfy the first criteria as the students are aware that the focus of the activity is on the grammar point in question. Another distinction that Ellis makes is between 'focused' and 'unfocused' tasks. This is delineated by whether the task is aimed at a specific linguistic feature (focused), or general communication (unfocused). In the case of focused tasks, the targeted linguistic feature needs to be disguised and hidden from the students in order for the task to refrain from becoming a situational grammar exercise.

One final point to consider from Ellis' (2009) article is the use of focus on form in his description of task based language teaching. His approach includes focus on form through all stages of a task-based lesson, including pre-task activities. The possible combination of pre-task activities with a focused task does seem to create a situation where it would be difficult to adhere to the first criteria outlined in Ellis' definition of a task. If the task was 'focused' on a certain grammatical point, and that point was highlighted in the pre-task activity, it becomes hard to imagine the grammatical focus of the task remaining hidden from the students.

A more open and relaxed definition of a task has been used by researchers such as Skehan (2003). This more inclusive description stems from the term 'task' originally being used as a replacement for 'communicative activity' (ibid). In this interpretation a task is simply viewed as a meaning based activity that requires the use of language to reach an objective. The benefit of this less restrictive definition is that it does not encounter the same difficulties that Ellis' (see above) does when including pre-task activities in combination with 'focused' activities.

There have been many possible benefits and uses of tasks that have been suggested. Robinson (2011) includes increased automatization of interlanguage, opportunities for 'noticing the gap', and creating opportunities for form-function-meaning mapping amongst the proposed advantages of TBL. Other possible benefits are outlined that could have a role in a reading context. The negotiating and comprehending of meaning in input derived language is easily placed in a reading situation. Reading based tasks can also be a useful opportunity for the incorporation of 'pre-modified' input that can provide positive examples of forms useful to a learner's development.

The degree of task utilization in a curriculum depends on what approach is being taken. Tasks can provide support for traditional syllabi, be the basis of a syllabus, or they can be used to assess achievements in a given situation (Robinson, 2011). Skehan (1996, 2003) also makes

a distinction between a 'weak' and 'strong' task-based approach. The weak approach views tasks in a supplementary role where they can provide an important complement to a complex pedagogy (Skehan, 1996). The strong approach on the other hand places tasks as the central unit in a syllabus. In the section that follows on the identification and analysis of issues I will discuss the approach that I consider the most appropriate in my own teaching context.

The appropriateness of 'focus on form' teaching in the EFL context in itself is open to debate. This type of instruction, where there is an "implicit focus on grammar during communicative language teaching" (Fotos, 1998, p.301), developed in response to the concern that concentration on meaning alone was detrimental to learners' understanding of form (Williams, 1995). Fotos argues that the 'noticing' hypothesis of Schmidt (1990) does not have the same validity in EFL contexts as in ESL ones. Schmidt asserts that learners only intake what they consciously notice and that implicit learning is only possible with features that co-occur frequently. Fotos contends, the level of L2 communication and input students encounter outside the classroom in EFL situations is not enough to satisfy the required frequency. Therefore, in these settings, the type of implicit instruction usually associated with focus on form teaching is not likely to be supported with enough suitable input. However, Fotos goes on to argue that a focus on form approach can be appropriate in EFL contexts if the instruction of the form is more explicit. Indeed, given the traditional grammar/translation techniques emphasized in many country's teaching approaches, such as Japan, Fotos believes that reading-based focus on form activities are particularly suitable for providing explicit instruction. The use of tasks to facilitate focus on form within the communicative EFL classroom is recommended for maximizing the students' target language use. However, with the use of explicit pre-task instruction, this again raises the question as to whether it is possible to reconcile these methods with the more stringent task definition previously mentioned.

3. Context

The two reading courses studied were basic and intermediate 'Reading for Academic Purposes' at a 2-year English specialist college in Japan. In the following section the numerous physical and non-physical factors that have an effect on the teaching situation will be outlined.

The students at the college are predominantly recent high school graduates and range in age from 18 to 21. However, there are also older students who are seeking further education after already completing an undergraduate degree at a university or spending time in the workforce. This disparity in age and background can have some beneficial effects, however, it

can also be the source of a sizeable gap in the English ability levels amongst the students.

A factor that impacts on the teaching context in relation to the language ability of the students is that the reading course groupings are more often than not decided by school year rather than skill level. One positive side effect of this is that issues arising from the strict junior-senior hierarchical relationships present in Japanese educational establishments become less of a factor. These hierarchical relationships will be discussed in more depth later in the paper. The large variation in skill levels does, however, present particular difficulties in a reading course when the level and speed each student can read at is widely divergent. This is especially noticeable when trying to encourage oral output in a class via pair or group work. If it is difficult for the students to read at the same level or speed, inevitable problems arise in working together on the same material.

Class size is also a significant factor. In recent years, the school has struggled to attract new students and the intake varies greatly from year to year. To illustrate this point, the total number of second year students at present is only 3, whereas the number of first year students is currently 9. Whilst providing excellent opportunities for student-teacher interaction, when the student numbers are very low it can be difficult to divide the class into groups or pairs with any kind of variety. The economic viability of the school is also an underlying concern as inevitable pressure to satisfy students who are ultimately 'customers' becomes an issue. In the same light, having apathetic or recalcitrant students do even simple tasks becomes challenging. Again, this topic will be considered further in section four.

Due to the size and age of the building the school is situated in, there are various limitations on the types of classes that can be undertaken and tasks that can be performed. The building is very old, and apart from a single computer room there are no Internet or audio-visual capabilities in any of the classrooms.

The curriculum design and planning is largely left to individual teachers. In general, the instructors of each course also handle the textbook selection. This provides a great deal of freedom to choose materials and methods. Furthermore, as the school claims to offer an integrated English education, the students take a wide variety of courses including reading, writing, oral communication, public speaking, TOEIC, pronunciation and grammar classes. However, as there is no integrated school curriculum and different teachers teach different courses, there is no cohesion or uniformity from course to course. Additionally, the majority of the teachers are employed on a part-time basis and are only onsite for their own classes leaving little opportunity for collaboration on structure or area of study.

Another area that can have an effect on the teaching context is the hierarchical nature of

the school organization. The administrators of the school, primarily the headmaster and deputy headmaster, have a highly respected position within the school. They, however, do not have any teaching responsibilities and have almost no contact with the teaching staff. As I outlined in the previous section, there is no overarching school curriculum, and the remoteness of the administrators and the top-down type of organisation make it difficult to initiate any kind of change to the status quo.

The next factor in the teaching context that needs to be considered is the level of continuation in the two-year span of the courses. Scheduling and contract changes lead to the teachers in charge of specific courses being moved around annually. Therefore, it is not uncommon to have completely different instructors and approaches in year one and year two for the same course. One more issue in regard to course continuation is the study-abroad program that the school administers. This program typically takes students out of the school for six months at the end of the first academic year. It often leads to very low numbers of remaining students for the first part of the second academic year. Moreover, when these students return to the class, there are pronounced differences in ability between the returnees and those students that did not study abroad.

One final issue is the concept of 'English for academic purposes'. In this college, the need for such a course is questionable. The majority of the students have no intention of continuing on to immersion type English programs here in Japan or to further education abroad. This raises the question: What 'academic purposes' are the students being prepared for? As already mentioned above, the courses are created, or more accurately named, then the content is left largely to the individual instructor.

４．Identification and Analysis of Issues

The impetus to look into the areas of oral production and the use of tasks in teaching reading began with the question of whether communicative methods were suitable or even desirable in the EFL reading classroom. In section two, a review showed relevant literature pertaining to reading teaching methods, the definition of tasks, and also the use of tasks in promoting oral production in the EFL setting and in particular EAP reading. A reflection on that literature and an investigation of the pertinent issues in this teaching context will be ventured.

Many of the suggested teaching methods and activities for reading instruction depend on the approaches that underpin them. For 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' approaches, as described

by Eskey and Grabe (1988), the types of classroom activities are aimed at completely opposite ends of the reading scale. The top-down approach focuses on the macro picture of the text as a whole and uses this knowledge to develop a more detailed understanding. The bottom-up approach, naturally, takes an entirely different set of skills. Here the emphasis is on understanding the micro components of the text, graphemes to words to sentences and upwards, to create a growing comprehension of the text. An issue that is common during higher English education in Japan is the aftermath resulting from an overload of grammar, vocabulary, and translation instruction during compulsory English education. As Fotos (1998) notes, the teaching of English in junior high scools and high schools in Japan is entirely test-driven. Especially in a competitive and declining market, private EFL establishments and the instructors they employ face great demands to make English 'fun'. Therefore, the bottom-up approach is likely to be more difficult to implement due to its focus on vocabulary and grammar and the negative connotations those aspects of language have picked up. Conversely, the strong foundations most students already have in grammar and vocabulary can be an advantage in pursuing the top-down approach. The teaching of strategies such as SQ3R: Survey, Question, Read, Recite and Review for example (Eskey & Grabe), can have an immediate positive effect on a student's ability to comprehend texts. However, the two approaches to top-down reading instruction suggested by Eskey and Grabe have some drawbacks in this teaching context.

The first approach Eskey and Grabe (1988) recommend is offering a large amount of reading material for the students to choose items from that interest them individually. This is problematic in this college due to a lack of a large library to provide suitable materials for the students to choose from. It is also not conducive to a communicative methodology as the students work independently and therefore do not have as many opportunities for pair work, group work or discussions. The second approach, a content-centred method, does provide for communicative activities such as group discussions or oral presentations. However, without any unifying content from an EAP viewpoint, and with limited class time available, this methodology is also difficult to implement.

The practices and methods recommended by Grabe and Stoller (2001) and introduced in section two do provide a starting point for a task based, communicative approach to EAP reading instruction. In the current course students are often asked to perform text-analysis activities such as rearranging jumbled up paragraphs from a text. The students discuss features present in the paragraphs and why they believe the paragraph should occupy a particular position in the text. An information gap element can be added to this exercise if

only one student has access to each individual paragraph and they have to paraphrase the contents to the group before discussing its location in the whole. This type of activity also ties in with Grabe and Stoller's methods for encouraging strategic reading. Here students are encouraged to summarize the text and discuss the strategies they used in trying to comprehend the meaning. Pre-reading activities, such as picture speculation and imagination exercises were found to be effective in a motivational and communicative context. Students can use their creative skills to predict what the story will be about and share their ideas in pairs or in groups. However, all of the practices Grabe and Stoller recommend are based on the presumption that the class is aimed at English for academic purposes.

The four reading purposes that Grabe and Stoller (2001) list as a minimum for EAP course students to learn are: searching for information, general comprehension, acquiring new information, and synthesizing and evaluating information. Therefore the strategies that they put forward for teaching reading are aimed at developing those skills. This brings up the issue of the reading goals for the students in this college's classes.

As previously mentioned in the teaching context section, the title of the courses are Reading for Academic Purposes. However, the students do not have an end goal of furthering their English education by studying in a native or immersion type context. The main problem faced is how to tailor the curriculum to fit the actual needs of the students. Some of the first year students will go abroad on the exchange program whilst some will stay in Japan for the entirety of the course. Invariably, the second year students are preoccupied with finding employment after they graduate. The purposes that Grabe and Stoller (2001) listed do, however, apply to all forms of reading and therefore a general approach can be catered for. As the students' main priorities are acquiring English skills for their future careers and/ or simply for their own enjoyment, attempting to create a curriculum that provides a solid understanding of reading techniques and strategies in a manner that maintains the students' level of engagement is crucial. The content involved in the curriculum tends to follow the pattern of encompassing as wide a range as possible. The reason for this is to maintain the students interest levels by varying the type of texts they are exposed to. It also allows for the use of numerous different types of teaching activity. The manner of instruction, and the use of tasks on the courses must now be considered.

Looking at the definitions of tasks discussed in section two, of major concern is whether the activities planned for the reading courses conform to the standards set out. Using the task definition provided by Skehan (2003), a large number of the communicative activities utilized in this context are 'meaning based' and require the use of language to reach an objective.

However, the more stringent definition that Ellis (2009) employs suggests that the semantic and pragmatic meaning, in addition to the (non-language based) outcome, should be the primary focus of any task. For a task such as a pre-reading picture speculation activity, the 'meaning' and 'outcome' is viewed as being secondary to the process of creating an imagined scenario for the upcoming text. In other words, the process rather than the product takes precedence. Additionally, does the presence of an auxiliary language target, such as reviewing and encouraging the use of modals within the picture speculation activity, preclude it from being classified as a 'task'?

Another issue that can interfere with the use of communicative tasks in the college are the hierarchical relationships amongst the students that were mentioned earlier. On the rare occasions that first year students are placed in the 'intermediate' reading class, or the more common occurrence of mature students being in the same group as young, recent high school graduates, a noticeable difference in how the students interact has been observed. Without straying too far into the sociological area of Confucianism in Japanese society, there is a well-defined senior-junior relationship in educational establishments. This is manifested in the politeness level of the language used when addressing each other or referring to another student in the third person and in many other patterns of behaviour. The possible implications this could have for the classroom include a reluctance on the part of the 'junior' to demonstrate a higher level of understanding than their 'senior' during a pair or group activity. In a similar manner, a 'senior' might find it uncomfortable to be placed in a situation where a younger student's clearly higher skill level disrupts the traditional relationship. These are considerations that often influence how groups can be organized within a class and can have an impact on the success of a communicative task or activity.

The next issue that can be a factor in this context is the idea of the student as a customer. In designing a curriculum and instructing the course, there is always concern that student dissatisfaction could lead to complaints or even to individuals leaving the school altogether. It is therefore necessary to maintain a balance between the methods that the instructor believes to be the most effective and the methods that seem the most palatable to the students. This issue acts as a factor in the decision to utilize TBL in the reading courses.

Reasons for using tasks in the units of the course are based around the belief that they are the best option for the present context in question. As noted in section two, tasks can be used to promote a number of different reading skills. They can also increase the level of communication and interaction within the classroom. Working in the context of Japanese language education, there is a noticeable preference in private, post-secondary language

education for a 'communicative' approach. This is demonstrated by the large number of 'English Conversation' schools. Another contributing factor is the large gap between passive and active language skills. This is a result of the highly test-based curriculum during compulsory education, which tends to create an exaggerated competence in reading proficiency in comparison to writing and speaking skills. The students also tend to indicate a desire for communicative activities when prompted in counselling sessions. However, the students are also products of an educational system that places great emphasis on rote learning of vocabulary and grammar drills. Therefore, in this context the 'weak' approach, as described by Skehan (1996), is considered to be more suitable as it allows a more balanced mix of communicative and traditional pedagogies. In focusing on purely communicative task activities, there is the danger of the students becoming disenchanted and getting the impression that they are not doing enough 'real' study in class.

5．Conclusion

This paper has been an attempt to discuss the use of task based learning in a reading for academic purposes course at a private, post-secondary college in Japan. Some of the major issues considered were the definition of a 'task', the varying degrees of implementation of tasks in a curriculum, and if tasks were suitable for the present context. Whether communicative based activities were the best use of time and focus in a reading course was also considered.

In the identification and analysis of issues section it was conjectured whether applying too strict a definition of a task on an activity would prevent it from qualifying as a task. It seems that the crux of this issue is the confluence of terms used in the research of second language acquisition and the pedagogy carried out in response to a myriad of contexts in second language teaching situations. In this present context, reconciling the desire to provide the most effective form of teaching with factors arising from a financially driven establishment and students with ill-defined language goals has often been a struggle. Moving forward, incorporating methodologies suggested by recent research into the teaching context is desired. However, to do this successfully it important not lose sight of the unique realities of the situations and contexts in which instructors are placed.

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