

TASK-BASED LEARNING IN LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION

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Introduction

This article considers first how the learning activities which students engage in during teacher education courses may contribute not only to their received knowledge about TBLT but also to their experiential knowledge. Then it looks at how the effectiveness of task-based interaction may be enhanced through collaborative learning techniques. Finally, it describes some task-based activities which draw on these techniques and were used in a pre-service teacher education course for L1 Chinese students.

The techniques and activities described are not restricted to teacher education courses but can be transferred to other contexts where a second language is learnt.

Received and experiential knowledge about TBLT

A familiar phenomenon in teacher development is that teachers' classroom beliefs and actions are often influenced less by the input from their pre-service teacher education courses than by their own previous learning experiences. This is often explained (e.g. by Borg 2004; Ellis 2006) with reference to Lortie's (1975) well known term 'the apprenticeship of observation'. Students have already sat through several thousand hours of learning and these have provided them with powerful mental models of teaching which are not easily changed by the formal input from courses in pedagogy. When students enter the classroom and are faced with a multitude of unfamiliar situations, these models (which have been deeply internalized over many years) provide them with 'default options' for how to think, act and respond.

The 'apprenticeship of observation' is often referred to in a negative way, since it may inhibit a new teacher's attempts to adopt innovations and teach according to newly acquired ideals and methods. However, once we recognize its influence, we can also draw on its positive potential as a blueprint for new learning. Thus, if our teacher education classes can provide models for ways in which the students themselves may later wish to teach, the content and the process of learning can reinforce each other. We may refer here to the distinction

between 'received' and 'experiential' knowledge (Wallace 1991, cited in Ellis 2006). Received knowledge is knowledge (here: about TBLT) received from various external sources such as lectures and reading. Experiential knowledge develops from the actual process of learning. One of our aims as teacher educators can be to let the two kinds of knowledge reinforce and illuminate each other – to harness, as Ellis (2006: 15) describes it, 'the subtle interplay of experiential knowledge with received knowledge'.

In the context of task-based learning and teaching, there are many possibilities for this interplay. Task-based learning is a cross-curricular concept and can be applied not only to how people learn a language but also to how people learn about language teaching. In both domains, received knowledge and experiential knowledge can support and reinforce each other. Thus, through task-based learning (about teaching) students can learn about task-based learning and teaching (of language). Indeed, if the students are themselves second language speakers, there is a third level of learning: if the students interact with each other in the second language (which I will here assume to be English - EFL or ESL), they are also developing their own experiential competence in English.

The teacher education context which I write about in this article is an MA in Language Studies programme at the Hong Kong Baptist University. The 33 students involved are either local Hong Kong students or students from Mainland China. All have Chinese as their first language. Some have already had teaching experience but most have recently graduated with English as their major subject. Many (but not all) plan to be teachers in their future career, in Hong Kong or Mainland China. In this context, the three levels of learning just mentioned are present:

- Level 1: The students explore principles that underlie second language learning and teaching. These principles are not exclusive to TBLT but may also apply to other approaches. For example, they discuss motivational strategies, their own experiences of language learning, and 'postmethod' principles of language teaching.

- Level 2: In exploring the principles, they are themselves involved in task-based learning. The activities embody the essential components usually proposed for TBLT: context, purpose, outcome, and activation of their framework of knowledge and skills.
- Level 3: As second language speakers, they develop their own competence in English through experiential language learning. For many, this is an important experience in developing their communication skills.

Regarding level 3, the students agreed at the beginning of the course that they would benefit most by using English as the medium for communication. Groups varied in how consistent they were with this.

Collaborative learning strategies and techniques

Two hazards which may threaten the success of task-based learning (whether in teacher education or in second language learning) are 'premature closure' and 'social loafing'. The former refers to the phenomenon that groups come to a quick and easy decision without considering an issue in depth. The second refers to the phenomenon that some students do not participate fully in group discussion but prefer to let others do all the work. To help reduce these phenomena, techniques associated with collaborative learning offer useful ways of structuring task-based learning. Here are some of the techniques used in the activities described below (others may be found in e.g. Littlewood 2009; McCafferty et al. 2006; Sharan 1999).

Jigsaw

- A task is designed with three or four subtasks which contribute towards the final outcome. For example, the outcome may be a presentation and the subtasks may involve reading an article, watching a video and interviewing classmates.
- In groups of three or four students, each member works on one of the subtasks.
- After students have worked on their separate subtasks, they return to their groups and contribute to preparing the group outcome, e.g. the presentation.

There may be a preliminary stage in which groups of students with the *same* subtask work together and help each other ('expert jigsaw').

Forward snowball

- Each student is given a set period of time (e.g. three minutes) in which to list (e.g.) four facts or ideas related to a theme.
- Students form pairs, discuss, and expand their ideas into a list of eight.
- Pairs form groups of four, who discuss and produce a combined list, deleting ideas which are repeated, but attempting to add more, to produce sixteen.
- These are shared with the class.

The effect is similar to 'brainstorming', in which the aim is to accumulate as many ideas as possible.

Reverse snowball

- Each student writes down ideas on a given topic, for example, what are the six most important characteristics of a successful language teacher.
- Students in pairs then discuss and attempt to reduce their combined list by agreeing on the six (or seven, etc.) most essential points.
- Pairs form groups of four, who again discuss and reduce their combined list, to produce an agreed list of the most essential points.
- These are shared with the class.

Whereas forward snowball leads to an accumulation of many ideas, reverse snowball encourages critical analysis and evaluation in order to select the most important ones.

Think, pair, share

- A topic for discussion is given to the class.
- Each student has a short period of time to think about it and jot down notes.
- Pairs of learners share ideas with each other for a further period.
- Pairs share their ideas within a larger group or the whole class.

This simple technique can be inserted spontaneously into almost any class as a way of maintaining involvement. The students in each pair may also be asked first to interview each other on the topic in question.

Three-step interview

- Students form groups of four, in which they choose or are assigned a topic for discussion.
- Each group of four divides immediately into two pairs.
- In each pair, A interviews B about the topic but does not express his or her own opinions. B then interviews A in the same way.
- The two pairs re-form into a group of four, in which they share ideas and opinions, enter into free discussion, and attempt to reach an agreement on the issue.
- Their conclusion may be reported to the class or form the basis of written report, etc.

Constructive controversy

- Students form groups of four and are assigned (or choose) a topic for debate (e.g. the pros and cons of using a published textbook).
- Each group divides into two pairs.
- Each pair is asked to support one side of the issue.
- Pairs research the issue and review the arguments on both sides.
- Groups of four are re-formed and a debate takes place, as each pair tries to convince the other pair of their own side of the issue.
- After a time, they step out of the 'formal' debating structure and engage in free discussion.

Numbered heads

(This is a way of organizing the feedback or reporting stage *after* group work.)

- In each group of (e.g.) four, the students are asked to assign numbers from 1 to 4 to each member.
- At the feedback or reporting stage, the teacher simply indicates a group and a number.

Each student has an equal chance of being asked to report and must therefore stay fully involved in the preceding group discussion.

Collaborative tasks for teacher education

In this section some collaborative tasks are described in which the students explore aspects of language learning and teaching, and, simultaneously, have direct experience of task-based learning and develop their communication skills (i.e. the three levels of learning mentioned earlier).

The tasks are presented in the sequence followed in the MA course. There were of course many other learning activities.

What is second language learning like?

(see Littlewood 2012, for a more detailed description.)

1. Each student writes down one or two metaphors (expressed as similes) which characterize his or her perceptions of language learning (by completing the frame 'Learning a second language is like ... because ...').
2. In the next session all the resulting metaphors are given to all students.
3. Groups discuss the metaphors and decide on (a) the six metaphors which best characterise, for them, the nature of second language learning and (b) the aspects of second language learning which each of the six metaphors captures.
4. Each chosen metaphor is given a score and the most popular ones are identified.
5. The outcome is a profile of the class's perceptions of second language learning.

The experience of second language learning

In Hayhoe (1998), Ruth Hayhoe describes her second language learning experiences in four stages of her life.

1. In groups of four, each student is given a section of the article corresponding to one of the stages and makes notes (in a table) about the writer's (a) learning opportunities, (b) reasons for learning, (c) strategies for learning and (d) outcomes of learning for that stage.
2. The groups of four come together and share results in 'jigsaw' mode.
3. Each group then focuses on just one dimension of learning (opportunities, reasons, strategies or outcomes) and analyzes how it changed in different stages of Hayhoe's experience.

4. Based on an interview schedule similar to the table used in the first step above, students interview each other about their own past learning experiences.
5. Some students report to the class about either their own or their partner's past learning experiences.

(In the course, this activity provided the basis for individual written accounts. It was also used to illustrate how such an account may be structured initially either around the main stages of learning or around the main dimensions of learning.)

Strategies for motivation

Renandya (2014) discusses '5Ts' of motivation: Teacher, Teaching method, Task, Text and Test.

1. Each group of four or five students is asked to generate (in 'forward snowball' mode) as many factors or strategies as they can that affect motivation in the domain of each of the 5Ts.
2. In the next session, the students are given all the results and each group is asked to focus on just one (assigned) of the 5Ts. In 'reverse snowball' mode, each group is asked to agree on the six most important strategies for that T and formulate them as 'commandments' to themselves as teachers (as in Dörnyei & Csizér 1998).
3. The resulting 30 commandments for motivation reflect the class's perception of motivational strategies for language learning.
4. They may also form the basis of a class-designed questionnaire to be given to students or teachers.

(In the course, the five sections were also used to illustrate alternative ways to design and format questionnaire items.)

Principles for a postmethod pedagogy

1. The students receive input about the 'set methods' which have influenced the development of language teaching, e.g. the grammar translation method, the audio-lingual method, situational language teaching and others included in e.g. Littlewood (2008) and Richards & Rodgers (2001).
2. They are asked to identify two ideas or techniques from each method which they would accept as important, even though the

method may no longer be accepted as valid as a complete 'package'.

3. They are also introduced to the rationale for 'postmethod' pedagogy and the proposals for postmethod principles and strategies put forward by Ellis (e.g. 2005) and Kumaravadivelu (e.g. 2006).
4. Based on this input and also their own learning experience, groups of three are asked to list what they themselves propose as the ten most important principles for second language teaching.
5. In the next session, each trio uses their own ten principles as a basis for evaluating an extract from a task-based lesson.
6. Trios double up to form groups of six. Here they share each other's principles and formulate a joint evaluation of the lesson extract for presentation to the whole class.

Techniques for teaching language skills and systems

This task is based on the principles of 'pecha kucha' (a presentation in which 20 PowerPoint slides are set to advance automatically at 20 second intervals). This is gaining in popularity but is still something of an adventure for most students. A good selection of pecha kucha presentations related to TESOL is available through the KOTESOL website.

1. Students are introduced to the notion of pecha kucha and watch some examples.
2. Each group of four or five is asked to prepare (in 'jigsaw' mode) a pecha kucha on one of the language skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking) or one of the language systems (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation), based e.g. on the relevant chapter in Nunan (2003) and any other input they may choose.
3. Groups are given the option to either present the pecha kucha 'live' or to record it for viewing in class. (In the course, one group chose to record it.)

The pecha kucha format proved a useful focusing device and effective in stimulating students to use their own words rather than highlight and read from a text. It also increased fluency.

Conclusion

Chinese students, like Japanese students, have a reputation for being passive and reticent in class (see e.g. Xie 2010). In the task-based learning activities reported in this article, the students contradicted this reputation and illustrated their wish to participate whole-heartedly and to explore ideas in creative, critical ways. This contributed in no small way to making the class into a cohesive 'learning community' (Watkins 2005) in which every member could learn with and from each other.

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