

Tasks & CALL: A Narrative Inquiry

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Abstract

Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) is an expanding research field as teachers and researchers find innovative and seemingly endless ways to use and adapt technology in the language learning classroom. Task-based Learning and Teaching and technology in the language classroom are both flexible and can be used for a variety of pedagogical objectives. Tasks involving technology have the potential to stimulate student centered activities, create language learning opportunities, increase enthusiasm in the language learning classroom, and help students realize classroom objectives. This ethnographic action research project seeks to use the natural conditions of a technology based language learning classroom to evaluate the use of tasks for the dual purposes; learning how to use technology and supporting language learning. It will share the experiences of the author and how his pedagogical knowledge, belief, and experiences influenced the decision to use tasks for such means. Perceptions of a group of students will also show students' attitudes and opinions about the use of these tasks through analysis of focus group transcripts.

Introduction

One of the questions that I would ask of myself and others during my student teaching was “But what is the best way to teach this?” and I was always mystified in those early days as to why no one could give me a concise, clear or definitive answer. Those teachers were informing me that there is a myriad of factors

involved with trying to find a “best” way. The teacher brings beliefs, teaching pedagogical knowledge, attitudes, values and experiences to the classroom which will ultimately impact and influence how they feel the best way to teach something is. Within the broad field of language learning and teaching, much research has investigated these aspects (see Golombek, 1998; Ganton, 1999; Freeman, 2002; Borg, 2003; Mullock, 2006; Borg, 2009) and more specifically research has been conducted in teaching grammar within English as second or foreign language contexts (see Borg 1999; Mitchell, Brumfit & Hooper, 1994). Finally, related to this current study, only a few attempts have been made to understand more about the teacher in the technology based classroom (see Gibson, 2008) and in the technology based language learning classroom (see Lam, 2000).

The pursuit of a “best” way to teach things has ended but my desire to understand more about teaching pedagogy and what the teacher brings to the classroom has increased. These thoughts on teaching prompted me to question the ways by which teachers teach students (and how students learn) how to use the computer for a language learning activity. Levy (1997) conducted a Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) survey and found that the top two methodologies or approaches teachers use to teach students how to use technology were the communicative approach and task based learning and teaching (TBLT). From observations of other classes and my own personal experiences, teachers tended to use a more teacher centered style to present the information to the students. The teacher controlled the knowledge and imparted this to the students, usually with a LCD projector beaming up images of the teacher’s computer to demonstrate to students the way of using a particular

computer program. However, I soon realized that whilst the eventual activity using the computer may include a plethora of language learning opportunities; for that period of time that I was teaching students how to use the technology, I was starving students of potential language learning opportunities. To maximize these opportunities, I drew upon my own pedagogical beliefs in post-methodology (see Richards & Rodgers, 1986; Kumaravadivelu 2002; Kumaravadivelu, 2005) and began teaching how to use technology that included a lot of student communication and interaction; specifically focusing on how tasks could support language learning. Whilst this may seem a contradiction, a belief in post-methodology yet still using TBLT methodology, it is in the emphasis of support that I use TBLT. Within a wider post-methodological framework, I used tasks to support students and I incorporated the methodology as part of the learning process. I began to facilitate more student centered activities, empower students with the information and give students the responsibility to teach each other.

This paper is a narrative inquiry into the use of tasks to facilitate learning of how to use different computer software and to support language learning. It will share the experiences of the author along with a group of students and reveal their perceptions of these technology based classroom tasks. Results from surveys and focus groups conducted will be analyzed and discussed concurrently to understand student perceptions on the use of tasks to support language learning and learning of how to use computer programs.

Tasks

Defining Tasks

Defining a task, for the dual purpose of learning how to use technology and promoting language learning, was gleaned from a range of sources within the field of TBLT and personal teaching pedagogical knowledge. Tasks have been a progression within a communicative language teaching pedagogy that offers a (more-) structured communication for a variety of objectives (Richards & Rodgers, 1986; Skehan, 1996; Ellis, 2003; Shehadeh, 2005). Much has been written about the flexibility and adaptability of tasks (Skehan, 1996; Candlin, 1987). Littlewood (2004) suggests that tasks will often sit somewhere on a continuum according to the extent of communication, task involvement and focus on meaning inherent in the task and thus the definition of a task will invariably differ. Bygate, Skehan, and Swain (2001) refer to a task requiring students to use language, with an emphasis on meaning, to fulfill an objective. Long (1985) refers to tasks that people do in their life, including both work and leisure time, and emphasizes the 'everyday' aspect. Skehan (1996) states that a task is "an activity in which: meaning is primary; there is some sort of relationship to the real world; task completion has some priority; and the assessment of task performance is in terms of task outcome". Nunan (1989) emphasizes cognitive processes that are involved in a task by stating that a task requires learners to comprehend, manipulate, produce or interact in the target language, focusing on meaning. Samuda & Bygate (2008) describe tasks involving language use for a pragmatic outcome to a challenge promoting language learning and development. Extending from the aforementioned definitions and personal teaching experience, a definition that guided tasks in this action research is:

Tasks are interaction-based language learning opportunities that focus on communicating meaning in which a linguistic structure is secondary to achieving the intended outcome of the task.

Whilst these aspects and this definition may be ideal, in reality teachers know that the plan of the lesson and the actual happenings of the lesson can sometimes be a world apart. Breen (1987) identifies this natural difference and labels them as the task-as-workplan and task-in-process. The task designer needs to acknowledge that students have their own way of doing things, they “reinterpret a workplan during the task-in-process” (Breen, 1987, p. 25). Even well designed tasks will be influenced by a myriad of ways which will ultimately affect the dynamics of the task.

Task-Supported Language Learning

Tasks within this class were not the sole pedagogical activity used in each lesson, nor were they the only instruction for the curriculum. Tasks were used as they offer flexibility, structure, and a basis for communicative language teaching and learning. Tasks in this way have been cited as a weak form as they are used within in a more intricate pedagogical context (Skehan, 1996). In this sense, task-supported language learning (TSLT) may be a more apt label of the way tasks were used within the curriculum and lessons. The make-up and theoretical underpinnings of the task remain unchanged from the previous discussion on tasks, however, these tasks were used to complement the author’s own teaching pedagogy and provide additional learning opportunities, both technological and language, for students (Samuda & Bygate, 2008). Ellis (2003, p. 30) furthers the TSLT definition by describing how tasks are “a means by which learners can

activate their existing knowledge of the L2 by developing fluency” as opposed to TBLT primarily acquiring new knowledge or interlanguage.

Tasks in the Technology Based Classroom

Whilst much research has been conducted on tasks in the language learning classroom, none known to the author have specifically focused on a classroom using technology. Typically tasks in the literature involve an interplay between various task features involving input, conditions, objectives, teacher, classroom environment, materials and, of course, students (see Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 1989). This action research project seeks to use the natural conditions of a technology based language learning classroom to evaluate the use of tasks for the dual purposes of this study. Such conditions unique to a technology based classroom might be the environment with students unable to move around the classroom freely because of physical constraints with computers in fixed positions. Input can come from various sources including not only the teacher and students, but also from the Internet, computer software and electronic data, like video or audio files. Materials in the technology based classroom are also multiplied as an almost never-ending number of software programs, hardware and electronic data could be used in the task. Finally, the teacher’s role in such a classroom may be secondary to the computer; teachers play the role of an organizer or facilitator more so than a traditional teacher role.

Method

Description of Tasks

This paper will describe three types of tasks that were used to teach skills for

Photoshop and Flash software programs. All tasks were styled on information gaps (Richards & Rodgers, 1986; Rubdy, 1998) but were subtly different in input, conditions or cognitive demands. Task 1 was used twice to teach one lesson of both Photoshop and Flash, while tasks 2 and 3 were only used once each. The setting for these tasks was always pair work using computers next to each other and the students' roles were always to work together with a partner. The author took a non-interventionist facilitator role in the classroom and generally only helped students when they asked for help. While observing in the background, there were times when the author felt that students did need a guide in the right direction so feedback or help was given to the individual or pair.

Task 1

The first task design, which was used to teach skills of both Photoshop and Flash, was an information gap task. Students received different halves of a set of instructions and shared their instructions verbally. Students wrote the missing instructions in the spaces provided so that students had a complete set of instructions. The objective for students was to get a complete set of instructions and simultaneously perform the skill outlined in those instructions together.

Task 2

The second task for the Flash software required students to listen to a three minute instruction video individually before teaching the skill to their partner. The video was uploaded online so that students could access it individually and have control over their viewing. Students completed a listening gap fill to gain a full set of instructions using answers provided to them. Once finished, students shared

their instructions and completed those skills at the same time. The objective for students was to teach each other their skill. Each student was given a set of complete instructions after they finished listening to the video but before they taught each other.

Task 3

The final task included both individual and pair work. Students were required to experiment with different filters in Photoshop and evaluate the interesting ones or the ones they saw as purposeful. Students then showed their partner the selected filters and gave their evaluation of how the filters could be used in future images. Students filled in a table with both sets of evaluations. Whilst not a feature of all tasks used in this study, this task featured an evaluation targeting cognitive processing in order to promote further language use. Ellis (2003) and Samuda & Bygate (2008) have both discussed cognitive processes as features, or dimensions, of tasks-based learning and Prahbu (1987) specifically states evaluation as one cognitive process that might promote language learning in the task. The objective was to evaluate a feature of Photoshop and share their evaluation with their partner.

Students and Class

The action research was conducted with a class of third and fourth year students at a private Japanese university. The 25 students were all English majors and had elected to take the subject *Multimedia and Communication* in which the research took place. Students were informed that participation in this research was voluntary; however, all students would complete the same work in class.

Students attended 2 x 90 minute classes per week for the 14 week semester: One class in a multimedia studio was a lesson on the multimedia software programs Photoshop, Flash, or iMovie, and the other in a normal classroom involved learning of some communication theories. An environmental and input constraint was that the programs were only in Japanese. For each of the multimedia programs, approximately 1/3 of students had learnt the program and knew it well, 1/3 of students had used the program but perhaps didn't have an extensive knowledge about it, and the remaining 1/3 of students had learnt nothing about the program. Only a few students had learnt all the programs before so at least one of the three was new for a vast majority of the students.

Procedure

Focus groups were used to investigate student attitudes and opinions towards the tasks. The focus groups were conducted with four volunteer students from the class and were conducted during the students' free time (see Table 1). There were two focus groups conducted on a range of lessons that students attended. The focus groups were conducted in Japanese to ensure that focus group participants weren't restricted or inhibited by language and were translated by an external bilingual person. The researcher was present in the room for the duration of the focus group for any technical difficulties but didn't include himself in the discussions. The focus group was self-administered as students read each question in English and answered together.

Table 1: Profile of volunteer focus group participants

| | S1 | S2 | S3 | S4 |
|---|----|---|---|---|
| Gender | | Female | Female | Female |
| Age | | 22 | 21 | 21 |
| How long have you learned English? | | 10 + years | 9 years | 6 years |
| Been overseas to an English speaking country? | | Yes – holiday for 3 weeks | Yes – study abroad for 1 year | No |
| Rate your language skills from strongest to weakest | | 1. Writing 2. Reading 3. Speaking 4. Listening | 1. Listening 2. Speaking 3. Reading 4. Writing | 1. Reading 2. Writing 3. Listening 4. Speaking |
| Rate how you like to learn in order of preference | | 1. Read an explanation 2. Hear an explanation 3. Do some practice 4. See a demonstration | 1. See a demonstration 2. Do some practice 3. Hear an explanation 4. Read an explanation | 1. Do some practice 2. See a demonstration 3. Hear an explanation 4. Read an explanation |
| How much of Photoshop was new to you? | | 100% | 0% | 80% |
| How much of Flash was new to you? | | 30% | 10% | 100% |

Note: S1 participated in the first focus group but didn't participate thereafter. No profile data was given by the participant.

Results and Discussion

The focus group yielded a significant amount of data and this data was analyzed for information pertinent to investigating student perceptions on whether they could learn how to use the software programs and whether the tasks were conducive for language learning. Discussion and comments will also be included within this section.

The focus group gave their opinions to a range of questions for task 1; the information gap styled task used to teach both Photoshop and Flash. When asked to rate how effective their communication was during the lesson, students explained a stunted form of communication existed during this task compared with other classes. Students perceived sharing opinions and participating in discussions as defining communication, whereas this information gap communication was deemed to be just telling or reading sentences or information to their partner. S3 summed up the general consensus when she said “I think saying opinions is more difficult but it is a better way to learn English communication because we can think”. Therefore, it may be the case that students felt their communication was poor because of their definition of communication.

During task 1, one student made reference to her partner as an influence on the task conditions, which differed from the task-as-workplan. S4 said:

“I don’t know about other people but in my case, my English became totally Japanglish when I was paired with my friend. But in contrary, when I was paired with someone who was not my friend or a very good speaker, I felt that I had to

work more seriously.”

This comment reflects on the classroom environment and its ability to impact the task-in-process. S4 used Japanglish, a hybrid form of Japanese and English, when she was in a comfortable pair with her friends as opposed to being more serious or language conscientious with someone else.

In terms of learning how to use the software program, students felt this way was not as effective as it could have been. S4 commented that she had to do more research outside the class to gain more skills. Further to this, S3 and S4 both said that they only understood a lot of the functions and tools that students were learning during the lesson because of their previous experience with the software. S2 said that she struggled because of her distinct lack of experience.

The design of task 2 included a section where students learnt instructions from a video before teaching their partner that skill. Students perceived that this task required them to primarily practice their listening. This was because the task asked students to listen to a video online for one skill in Flash before listening to their partner's instructions about the second skill. This task and lesson was understood by all: S3 said she understood 99% of the materials and S2 and S4 estimated 100%. When asked to rate how effective their communication was during the lesson, S2 commented,

“I talked about a lot of things related to the text but it was just a repetition of it so I only used a few limited words. I think I could have a communication but it

wasn't fluent.”

Interestingly, S2 has negatively described the inherent repetition designed into the task. The task-as-workplan aimed to have students try to learn both the skills and language through repetition and constant exposure. This could break down again to being a difference of opinion in the students' definition of communication. For the same question, S4 explained that they only used the vocabulary of the skills; hopefully this resulted in acquisition or increased fluency.

An analysis for information concerning whether this task could be used to teach students how to use software, students comments again referred to differences between the task-as-workplan and task-in-process. S2 made a reference to the task working well or not depending on her partner. A person she knew may make her work hard but a person who speaks Japanese will cause them not to do the work well. S3 said that they could effectively teach their partner but was aided by Flash being a Japanese software program and therefore if she didn't understand any of the English materials, she could understand the Japanese software. S4 shared her similar opinion and said,

“I could show how to do [the functions] using the computer while I was teaching and we could practice together so I could teach even when I didn't know how to explain.”

This quote may show that this student felt the Japanese software helped her teach her partner even though her English may not have been sufficient for a good,

effective explanation. On this occasion it shows similarities between the task-as-workplan and task-in-process because she described the process intended by the task; teaching each other and practicing together. In stark contrast, it demonstrates students' ability to finish a task in an unintended fashion as they could have taught and practiced using minimal English.

When analyzing the data for language learning in task 3, students described what the task required them to do and evaluated its effectiveness. When asked whether they thought learning about Photoshop in this way was good for their English, S2 stated that learning English was difficult for her with a computer. S3 shed more light on the effectiveness of the task when she said "As we had to explain what I learnt to my group member or partner, in this class, I think I could learn how I should explain well and form the sentences". This task required students to evaluate filters and share it with their partner and it may appear that S3 has realized or fulfilled this objective. S3 uses "explain" which may indicate her need to justify the filters she chose when telling her partner. S4 describes the lesson she and her partner did by saying "I think we didn't practice English for communication or presentation. I think we practiced English for telling information". This candid appraisal of the task may reveal that S4 felt the task required more of a one-way monologue.

When analyzing focus group discussions about task 3, students felt it was difficult to learn skills of the program and teach them within that lesson to their partner. Students referred to time constraints and a lack of knowledge of the skills when describing their lack of confidence. Skehan (1996) discusses cognitive

complexity as a feature of tasks that may affect student performance. It appears that in this case, the task may have been overly cognitively demanding: students couldn't sample the filters, evaluate them and teach their partner about some interesting ones within the time frame given, all in a foreign language. As a result, when asked about their ability to effectively teach, S2 resorted to using Japanese during this particular lesson and suggested that "It would be better if we could teach each other in the following class". Interestingly, S4 commented to the same question that teaching only the interesting effects was okay because "remembering everything that we were taught is very difficult". This task design feature aimed to make the learning relevant to them by targeting effects that they thought were interesting or purposeful. This comment demonstrates that this student deemed this effective learning and the task-as-workplan and task-in-process were perceivably close.

Generally speaking, one common point of departure throughout the focus group was to divert dialogue towards the constraint of learning in English, both in instruction and materials, on Japanese software. S4 commented on the English handout and Japanese software:

"The handout was very useful. However, it was in Japanese so I couldn't understand even I looked at this handout because I didn't know what these words or names are in Japanese."

In addition, S3 agreed when she said "learning in same language is easier to understand, isn't it?" When asked directly how much of the materials they

understood, none commented that they understood the materials perfectly (S1=60%; S2=60%; S3=90%; S4=70%).

Future Implications and Conclusion

As revealed in the results and discussion section, students perceived more positively task 2 with the video uploaded online. The three students by and large understood all of the materials used in the lesson and it has been shown that one student could teach and practice confidently with their partner. Whilst it may have been said with negative connotations, the repetition in the task may produce more language learning or acquisition and more learning about the software. In summary, S2 stated that “I think it would be good to practice how to explain something in every class”. Instructions in the video, but from the teacher, coupled with these classroom conditions may warrant more tasks to be modeled like this. From personal experience, students seem to be enthusiastic towards and motivated by viewing videos online. It might be the novelty of such a task, or these tasks appeal to the new generation of web savvy students.

Whilst focus groups revealed various opinions, a more in-depth interview or stimulated recall of students completing a task could be used next time to further investigate student perceptions towards tasks for learning how to use software and whether the tasks helped language learning. On occasions students' work-in-process was revealed to be slightly to the intended work-as-process. Students indicated that partner pairings, time constraints, perceived language deficiencies, and the combination of the Japanese software with English instructions and materials resulted in changing the task dynamics. Analysis of the focus group

transcripts indicated that the language difference between the software and instructions and materials was a hurdle which all students noticed. Whilst unavoidable in the institution that this action research was conducted in, it is one area that may produce different results.

Tasks have been used in an attempt to promote language learning whilst at the same time help students learn how to use that software: Photoshop and Flash. Whilst results varied, students found a number of positives in using tasks. In particular, the use of an online video guided students to work and practice independently before teaching or sharing the new skill set with their partner. Students reported that this particular way of learning made it easier to practice individually first and then to explain it afterwards to their partner. From a personal reflection, the video may reduce pressure, in terms of cognitive demands, knowledge of content (skills of the software), and language processing capabilities, on students to instantly teach their partner. Skehan (1996) outlines task sequencing features that include code complexity, cognitive complexity, and communicative stress. Further research may show that task 2, which includes the video, may be more likely to change the dynamics within these categories, which in turn may result in more language learning and learning how to use the software. Whilst this research has shown specific learning of skills of the software programs Photoshop and Flash, results may warrant further research of tasks to teach other software or Internet features.

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