

Focusing on the Task in the ESOL Classroom

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Introduction

I am writing this in Doha, where I manage the ESOL program for Qatar's national utility company. English is the language of business communication in Qatar (indeed, this is the case generally in the Arabian Gulf), and as many of my company's employees have poor English skills my responsibilities include the provision of suitable language training. In theory, that responsibility is easily met. A phone call to one of the local language schools, and we are in business—safe in the hands of experts who will determine our needs and provide the training required. Unfortunately, such optimism is premature. Sourcing effective English classes can be more difficult than it might be thought, at least here in the Middle East where, despite the enthusiasm and professionalism of language teachers, TESOL programs often fail to achieve their targets, and there is a widespread feeling on the part of managers that time spent by their employees in the language classroom is wasted.

There is no single cause for this failure. Learning is not just a product of classroom activity, and workplace performance is not just a matter of knowledge and skill; in the Middle East, as elsewhere, the programs that do not meet expectations fail for multiple reasons. However, in addition to whatever problems we might find in the classroom or workplace, there are those that result from miscommunication between the parties involved—that follow from the differing expectations of competence engendered by the languages of TESOL and business.

Definitions of Competence

Student goals as language-learners are typically unformulated. They know that they want to learn English, but they have not usually given much thought to what they mean by this. Both employers and teachers have given thought to the goals of language learning, however, and both are likely to talk of competence—and it is with this apparent agreement that our problems begin. When TESOL professionals talk of competence they mean a mastery of the "systems of knowledge and skill required for communication" (Canale, 1983, p. 5), and they usually think holistically of "competent users" able to interact successfully with other users of English in a wide range of social and professional relationships. When employers talk of competence, they have in mind the knowledge, skill or ability needed for the performance of a specified, work-related task.

There is clearly room for misunderstanding here. For the one party, communicative competence is a goal in itself; for the other party, it is a means to an end. As a result, while teachers might judge a course a success if students can use the structures and lexis taught, employers will only do

so if the students can work more efficiently or effectively. From their perspective, as Rosenberg notes, "every [training] intervention ought to change the organization in some way..." (1990, p. 48).

This concern by employers for on-the-job performance should not be interpreted as a concern to restrict language input or predetermine classroom technique. Though employers need those learning English to return to their workplace able to accurately relay phone messages, or write up notes on equipment malfunction, and are usually not at all interested in whether their employee can discuss his fears of spiders, or whether she has mastered the schema for ordering wine with a meal. This is because of their concern with output (use) not input (training). One should not conclude from this that fears and phobias should not be discussed in the language classroom, or that none of our employees need to learn how respond to the questions of a sommelier (though the fact that most are Muslim does raise some questions of the cultural appropriateness of the activity). If discussions of arachnophobia enhance an employee's ability to communicate clearly and think critically, managers would have no problem with the activity. If the subject of dining out proves to be interesting and the employee consequently masters the use of such structures as "What do you suggest/recommend/think...?" (and can then adapt the "ordering wine" script for use at work), managers would be delighted.

Situated as I am, I can report that such adaptations of what is learned in the classroom do not occur as often as either teachers or employers would like, and thought needs be given to using more salient activities, so that learners can more readily draw on what they have learned when given opportunities to use their English at work. However, just pulling an ESP (English for Specific Purposes) course book off the shelf and substituting "ordering stationary" for "ordering wine" is not the answer (or at least not all of it); on the one hand, the idea of ordering stationary is probably going to be far less interesting for students than that of ordering wine, and, on the other, the change in activity is not in itself going to solve the basic problem—the misalignment of the expectations of teacher and employer. For alignment to be possible, teachers need to start their preparation with a focus on outcomes, rather than on input.

Focusing on outcomes in the initial stages of lesson planning is of course logical, as R. C. MacGregor's analysis (1993) of the instructional design has shown. (MacGregor was specifically thinking of the courseware development process, but his point is more widely applicable.) In a learning task (T) the learner's initial state (I) will ideally be transformed to a new state (O), as follows:

[1] T (I)→(O).

Of course, as MacGregor himself acknowledged, this model is only useful if the task is fully determined, we know the initial state of the learner, and the outcomes are measurable. If the training is designed without any awareness of the trainee's actual knowledge or skills level, then the model becomes:

[2] T (?)→(O).

While if the outcomes desired are unknown, because there has insufficient task specification (or none at all), the model then becomes:

[3] T (?)→(?).

At this point, MacGregor noted, his model is about to self-destruct. With insufficient information about the learner, there is little guarantee that the learning task is appropriate and the model degenerates to:

[4] ? (?)→(?).

However, though logic suggests the need to work back from the outcomes required to the skills-gap to be addressed (and the learning tasks to be used), nothing in MacGregor's model prevents us using structural or lexical targets ("use the present simple with future reference"), or non-specific aspirations ("become effective readers"). To align goals with workplace reality we need to go a step further and identify the real-world task to be performed, the conditions under which performance takes place, and the standards to be met. As an example of what is possible in the way of specification, we might consider the UK's National Language Standards (2000), which define the task of "Obtain[ing] information about complex work tasks by reading" (Unit 4R1) by specifying a range of source materials—"articles; reports; discussion papers and correspondence; technical manuals and training materials"—and a minimum length for texts of 800 words. Such specifications would ideally be refined by needs analysis, but even unmodified they provide a useful starting point for the construction of a task.

Task-Based Learning

In talking of tasks in this way, I am skirting the fringes of task-based learning. Although teachers are usually thinking of a pedagogic task, not one undertaken in the workplace when they talk about "a task" (see Hedge, 2000, p. 359 for a useful summary of the components of a pedagogic task), their reflections on the workings of task-based instruction are nevertheless likely to address issues similar to those that concern us here. An emphasis on meaning rather than form in task-performance (Nunan, 1989, p. 10; Skehan, 1996, p. 20) leads naturally to Willis' definition of a task as "a goal-oriented activity in which learners use language to achieve a real outcome" (1996, p. 53) and working with that definition, all that is needed for salience is for these outcomes to correspond to those actually required on the job.

That said, it would be naïve not to recognize that thinking of tasks as real-world performances goes against the grain: there is a tradition of seeing them as elements within a work plan, and not as real-world

interactions; as language tasks, rather than non-linguistic problems whose solution would depend upon effective language use. However, though this redefinition of the task would take effort, it is possible and it can be effective, as N. S. Prabhu showed with the Madras/Bangalore Communicative Teaching Project (usually referred to as "The Bangalore Project", 1987 for short).

As it happens Prabhu was uninterested in directly preparing students for the linguistic demands of life outside the classroom. Corporate training is primarily interested in closing current skills gaps, not in discovering unsuspected potential; in Prabhu's terms, that is to say, it is concerned with equipping rather than enabling. Prabhu, however, was interested in the enabling process, and developing the potential of students in the language classroom. (As quoted in Foley, 1990, p. 93, Prabhu defined *equipping* as providing students "the knowledge and skill necessary for functioning in later years as useful and productive members of the society," and *enabling* as providing "opportunity and support in realising their potential, in the form of understanding or ability.") In the present context this is done. What is important for us about The Bangalore Project is not the kind of task undertaken, but the unrelenting concentration on the task itself. Prabhu believed that grammatical competence is best developed as learners attempt on the one hand to "make sense of the language encountered" in task fulfillment, and on the other to "get meaning across" in the context of task performance (Prabu, 1987, p. 15). As a result, lessons focused on task completion rather than building a representation of the language system; they involved doing something, not learning how to do something, or learning what you need to know in order to do something, but actually doing something.

Prabhu's exclusive use of meaning-focused activities has been criticized (McLaughlin, 1990), and I grant that other approaches also need to be used. Although people can effectively respond to a rule-based system without becoming aware of all the rules (Nokes and Ohlsson, 2000, p. 833; cf. Reber, 1967; Whittlesea and Wright, 1997), and that being the case not all aspects of a language system need to be explicitly defined for learners (Krashen, 1985), it is perhaps a step too far to remove all explicit support from the classroom (see the discussion in Berry, 1994). However, how that support is provided is not important in itself: though I suspect that practice of leaving formal language work until after the completion of the task cycle would be more effective than other methods (Willis, 1996, p. 53), different learner groups and different tasks might well require other approaches. What is important is the linking of task and real world needs. What is needed, that is to say, is not a new instructional methodology or classroom technique, but a new way of looking at the activities undertaken.

An Example

Consider the writing of a business letter. Most courses teach this by illustrating the typical organization of such a letter, and having learners follow the model. There is no reason for their doing so except that business

letters form part of the syllabus being followed. An alternative approach, which sees such a letter as a means to an end rather than the end itself, would place learners in the situation where writing was instrumental in attaining some larger goal. For example, they might be constituted as a company that sells widgets, and challenged to reply to the letters they receive. The first might be a request for a quotation. In order to provide a competitive price the company has to know how much widgets cost, and this they find out by writing to a widget manufacturer (using the request they received as a model), then using the manufacturer's reply as a model for their own. The scenario could, of course, embrace a wide range of tasks and a whole scheme of work. The benefits of such an approach should be obvious and follow:

1. Situating the task in a (simulated) business environment concentrates the learner's mind. In such an environment, tardiness would lead to reminders from the customer; poor structural command could be flagged by requests for clarification, or by customers taking their business elsewhere. Language would be seen to have consequences. Words would build into sentences; sentences into social acts.

2. Because of their interaction with customers and suppliers (real or simulated), learners would be using language outside of a controlled TESOL environment and dealing with something approaching the unpredictability of the real world (for the importance of this, see Schön, 1983, p. 19). As learning typically stops when learners achieve communicative success, maintaining fluidity in their interactions with their linguistic and social environment would inhibit fossilization.

3. Such a task-based approach shifts the focus from *learning about* to *doing*. There is a change from "let us learn how to write a quotation" (a directive), to "I must prepare a competitive quotation or I will lose the business" (a need), and with the change comes the probability of fuller integration of what makes for a good letter into the learner's procedural repertoire. After all, in casting around for a solution to a problem we are more likely to recall what we have done rather than what we know.

This last point is not, as it might seem, behaviorism in a new form. It simply follows from the belief that a tool (or a skill) needs to be used for its use to be learned. Consider, for example, a simple mechanical skill such as switching on the light. In one sense, learning to do this is simply a matter of learning to flip a switch; however, just learning how to do this is meaningless if there is no reason for doing so. The act needs definition (as a means to being able to read in a dark room, say) and its ability to bring light in darkness demonstrated if the skill is going to be recalled at a time when its use is appropriate, and not be simply stored in memory as an exercise in hand-eye coordination. Inasmuch as language use (like switch-flipping) is primarily defined by real world situations, if divorced from such situations it is likely to be remembered as a sequence of phonemes/graphemes, not a solution to a communicative need.

Conclusion

As I reflect on the current situation here in the Middle East, I am reminded of Michael Cole's use of a garden metaphor to describe the work of systems developers. Gardeners, he notes, "must attend simultaneously to two classes of concerns: what transpires inside the system ('garden') . . . and what transpires around it" (1995, p. 196). So must developers, he argues. And so, I would add, must language teachers, for it seems to me that (in Cole's terms) most are working as though they were in a biodome and that is too limiting for their learners. Language use involves not just knowing the scripts (the schemata) that govern interaction; it also involves responding to using them and, in doing so, responding to an interlocutor's competing needs, assumptions and objectives. Ultimately, it can only be mastered through free interaction, in an environment where communication is necessary and retreating into silence is not an option; in short, it can only be mastered in the performance of (real-world) tasks.

Changing the way one teaches to allow for such tasks in the classroom would involve effort. But it would be a mental effort, a matter of focus, not a matter of new teaching skills. The crucial change required is one of orientation in lesson planning/syllabus design, of being oriented to the *purposes* for linguistic performance, not to its components (structure, lexis, register, discourse pattern, etc.). Working back from those purposes, and tasks that embody them, would help learners by providing definition and salience—and opportunities to gain greater workplace competence. Here in Doha, that would be no small gain.

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