Tasks in Communicative Language Teaching
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ABSTRACT

This short reflective paper focuses on the place of tasks in English Discussion Class (EDC). It considers the role of tasks in lessons and ways in which my personal experiences of teaching in the program have encouraged reflection on the application of tasks in speaking skills classes. Also included are some brief observations on task-based learning from my lessons this academic year and a faculty-development session I led based on materials and activity design for the final review lesson.

INTRODUCTION

Thinking about the role of tasks in EDC lessons calls for a brief recollection of the approaches and methods used and not used in the program. This will provide some background on my reflections on this topic.

The EDC unified curriculum follows a Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach that rests on core assumptions about the best way for our students to acquire discussion skills. Prioritizing the process of communication as an essential part of acquiring English, this approach implies a broader view of language focusing on communicative functions and the practical application of language rather than concentrating solely on structure (Littlewood, 1981). CLT is an approach, rather than a method, and its aims are twofold: "to make communicative competence the goal of language teaching", and to "develop procedures for the teaching of the four language skills that acknowledge the interdependence of language and communication" (Richards & Rogers, 2001, p.155). Many of the defining CLT principles are adhered to in discussion class such as acquiring language through extensive usage, striving for meaningful communication, and building fluency as a necessary aspect of communicative competence.

EDC uses a weak version of CLT connected with *task-supported language teaching* which views tasks as supplementary fluency building activities and places high importance on specific language units acquired assuming that "components of communicative competence can be identified and systematically taught" through the introduction of functional language (Ellis, 2003, pp.28-30). These assumptions make the course cognate with a Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) method of instruction in which target language is taught and put into action. As with many instructors starting in the program, the PPP method was familiar to me from pre-service training courses and previous teaching roles where lessons had a clear grammar focus. In EDC lessons, the three stages of the method are clearly set out from the function presentation leading to communicative practice tasks in the function practice and discussion preparation stages, followed by extended discussions. Reference to the PPP method is implicit in the EDC syllabus design (Hurling, 2012).

This direction taken in EDC is distinct from a stronger CLT design more closely aligned with *task-based language teaching* (TBLT), referring to a teaching model that seeks to maximize learner engagement using authentic language and tasks or activities designed to encourage learners to be independent in choosing appropriate linguistic tools (Willis & Willis, 2007). TBLT puts emphasis on aspects of program design where language is treated as contingent and subordinate to completion of tasks, in which curriculum and methods are less distinct but where the syllabus concentrates on the nature and order of tasks to be performed whilst methodology focuses on specific pre-, during, and post-task procedures (Ellis, 2003). In this sense the tasks constitutes a

pedagogical element from which a whole course or syllabus can be designed around.

In official EDC materials, less is mentioned regarding aspects of the TBLT approach and its possible inclusion in EDC. In spite of this, instructors in the program produce and distribute supplementary or redesigned core materials that lean towards a more task-based position. Traditionally in ELT, TBLT has been lauded as an approach often experimented with by teachers once they have mastered more conventional modes of English language teaching such as PPP. In EDC, it is a model perhaps given more consideration by instructors after several years of service looking to experiment with different classroom activities. Such has been the case in my experience.

This paper provides some foundation for the following discussion that contemplates possible scope for task-based activities more closely related to a strong version CLT in some stages of EDC lessons. Even though EDC lessons use a weak version of CLT, musings are given to the prospect that some review lessons and activities within regular lessons can feature stronger elements more amenable to TBLT. This is not a theoretical paper that attempts to challenge the distinctions between rival approaches and methods or an indirect attempt to suggest challenging the pedagogical approach of the EDC program.   My aim is simply to meditate on the ways in which teaching EDC lessons has made me think more about the position of tasks in our program.

DISCUSSION

Prior to starting in EDC, when teaching general English lessons I regularly implemented the PPP method to facilitate students' acquisition of key grammar points. In such cases I often considered limits to the extent that the language could actually be practiced before students lost interest and the length of time in the production stage before learners exhausted all meaningful opportunities to use the language point. Within a two or three hour lesson, I observed a certain ceiling to how many separate items of target language could be introduced before diminishing returns set in. Often in these kinds of teaching situations when the target language has passed through the PPP stages, I would set up a speaking fluency activity with a clear task assigned to it, for instance a role-play activity or a group mini-presentation. This kind of activity was essentially task-based in that it included: a pre-task stage (instructions were given), a task (performed by students whilst the teacher monitored), and a review (including comments and evaluation from peers in a form of a reflection). Along with the freedom to select my teaching approach and methods another aspect I was not restricted by was the awarding of grades for students performance in each lesson.

Upon joining EDC, I immediately noticed that one of the main advantages of employing a PPP method as part of a weaker CLT approach was that it provided a good fit with the assessment and grading demands found in university programs. Although they are modestly weighted in terms of grading (20% of regular and discussion test lessons) function phrases as the assessed target language are given an enormous amount of attention in EDC lessons. During my earlier days of teaching discussion class, I stuck tightly to the PPP method in all stages of the lesson and my attention was on achieving lesson aims and adhering to course objectives. In discussion preparation stages, designed as controlled practice drill, I would often be monitoring carefully and prompting students to use the target language when necessary. With time and experience, I began to think more carefully about designing practice and discussion preparation materials which hemmed in students' language options and channeled them towards the target language by cutting off other alternatives. Often I did this by providing a scaffolding structure on paper. However, during these activities more reluctant students would sometimes rile against this explicit pushing of the target language on my part and choose not to follow the structure unless specific individual instructions were given to do so. This caused me to think carefully about how perhaps the mandatory nature of the EDC program and the often stringent demands instructors place on students to repeatedly perform function phrases could be contributing to forms of resistance from

more reluctant learners. These thought developments led me to consider more autonomous goal-oriented tasks to set students putting less emphasis on precise phrases to be used but which clandestinely increased the quantity and meaningfulness of target language. My experiences of attempting these kinds of covert practice activities led me to think about the extent to which these tasks bore a resemblance to TBLT.

Various attempts have been made to incorporate task-oriented activities in the EDC classroom in regular or review lessons where the language focus remains present but can be momentarily backgrounded. Several examples of activities spring to mind that perhaps lean momentarily towards a more task-based approach to CLT. One clear example is from lesson 8 (review) of the Spring Semester textbook (2016) on the topic of university students and independence. This preparation activity is easily adapted into an 'independence test' in which students interview others in a mingle activity to discover the most independent student in the class. Simply by establishing a few brief instructions and offering no explicit language instruction students will ask multiple questions to complete the task and simultaneously practice 'follow-up questions' which is a partial focus of that particular review lesson. Similar results can be achieved by going off topic and setting up a short task in which students are set the goal of organizing themselves into an ordered line according to their date of birth. Completing this task will of course require questions and once students are in sequence the teacher can easily check this order and perhaps review the questions students used to achieve the task.

Although in these activities the over-arching language aim of the lesson is not far in the distance, I have observed over time that a brief intermission from controlled practice outside of the extended discussion in a task-focused activity can deliver benefits. Task-based activities can prove a motivating and enjoyable context for students, provide a more natural context for interaction in which language is more personalized and relevant to the individual, and produce a wider variety of language and interlanguage often combined with functional target language. Of late, some instructors have even made attempts to adapt core course materials such as the discussion questions in the textbook to create 'discussion tasks' in which there is a clear goal to be achieved in the group discussion (Singh, 2017).

When using a more task-based approach in regular lessons the experience remains limited by assessment insofar as students are still expected to perform target language and are assessed on their ability to do so. However, one situation in which there is room to exploit task-based approaches to their fullest is in the final review lesson 14. In this lesson there are no grades awarded for functional language and communication skills. Because of this, instructors do not feel obliged to demand that students perform the target language in every activity. To reflect further on this window of opportunity, I led a short lesson planning faculty development session for lesson 14 which focused on potential task-based activities that could be implemented.

In this session I presented participants with materials for a task-based lesson on the topic of 'Survivors', partly comprised of a role-play activity in which students present their rationale for remaining on a marooned boat that can cannot accommodate all aboard and have to vote on one person to be thrown overboard. Part two of the lesson entails groups of students offering escape solutions to various harrowing scenarios and deciding which option is most likely to lead to a safe resolution.   Other participants shared a task-oriented version of the 'Job Hunting' lesson. This included a group recruitment role play in which students enacted a committee tasked with selecting the most suitable candidate from a group of interviewees based on attributes provided on profile factsheet.

Discussing these task-based lessons and activity ideas generated a number of discussion points. Firstly, it became clear when explaining the procedure of each task that it is important for the instructor to clarify various steps in the pre-, during, and post-task stages, and to keep

instructions consistent the general goal of the task. This is something that EDC instructors could overlook due to the high levels of repetition they are used to when habitually delivering similar format PPP-style lessons to students who are familiar with these patterns of activities. A second consideration related to the style of communication that would be present in these activities and uncertainty over the time duration necessary to complete the task. According to Grice's maxims of quantity and manner, effective communication to achieve a task is achieved by using language as efficiently and concisely as possible (Grice, 1975). In a task-based activity this could mean very short speaking turns and the goal being achieved too quickly. Some of the thoughts in the session touched on the idea that this dynamic may be counteracted by additional speaking turns in the form of questioning and disagreement stimulated by students being motivated to play a dominant role in influencing the outcome of the task.

CONCLUSION

Although the program appears to rigidly follow a unified curriculum based on a weak CLT approach, TBLT need not be completely overlooked in all aspects of EDC lessons. Some classes could profit from task-based activities that allow for greater autonomy, and taking time out from demanding quantified usage of highly specific target-language could deliver motivational benefits to our learners and produce some surprising results in terms of interlanguage. However, the syllabus design and grading/assessment criteria for this program (and other university English language courses) limit these task-based moments and offer only rare and fleeting opportunities for strong CLT in discussion class.

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