

Applying Frameworks to Foster Foreign Language Learning

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外国語学習を促進するフレームワークの適用

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Abstract

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This paper first outlines 3 frameworks involved in designing and applying foreign language lessons. First, principles of task design that can be applied to make lessons more meaningful and motivating are outlined. Next, four modes of language learning that should be integrated into all language classes and courses are explained. After that, an outline of the cognitive features of language learning activities that teachers should consider when analyzing lessons is explained. Finally, the paper concludes with practical applications in 3 separate collaborations working with English teachers at junior high and elementary schools.

Key Words: English teaching, vocabulary learning, task-based learning

I. Introduction

In this paper, frameworks for fostering foreign language learning are reflected on with regard to 3 separate collaborations with teachers at the attached junior high and elementary schools attached to Kyoto University of Education. The three projects were as follows: (1) observing and reflecting on lessons together with Teacher A as she developed an English lesson for public demonstration lesson at Momoyama Attached Junior High School; (2) discussing and designing a lesson with Teacher B as she prepared her public demonstration lesson at Kyoto Junior School; and (3) collaborating with elementary and middle school teachers at Kyoto Junior school in producing their intra school Oral Interpretation Contest. In all projects aimed at language learning, it is helpful to refer to 3 key frameworks based in theories of instructed second language acquisition: principles of task design, the modes of learning activities, and the

cognitive features of language learning activities. In this article, after briefly discussing each of these frameworks, how these were applied in the above collaborations will be discussed.

II. Making Language Learning Tasks Meaningful

When designing any language learning activity, efforts should be made to make it as meaningful and purposeful as possible. The natural reason human beings have been endowed with the gift of language is to use it to communicate and understand relevant ideas. However, in schools and classrooms using language naturally is often at odds with learning goals: students must also learn grammar and vocabulary if they are to be able to function using the foreign language. It is essential to balance these two opposing poles in order to designing tasks that are both meaningful and effective. Ellis and Shintani (2013) suggest that for a language learning task work plan, principles 1 to 4 should be met.

1. The primary focus is on understanding and sharing relevant and meaningful ideas.
2. There is a communication gap that needs to be resolved.
3. Learners are not pre-taught language, they acquire new language when they need to.
4. There is a clearly defined outcome for assessment.

Meeting these 4 criteria assures the teacher that the language learning tasks they design are relevant and meaningful in real world communication. From the outset, learners are doing something with the target language that is meaningful in its own right. This is a very difficult standard to meet, as pedagogical demands for L2 English learning are not framed in reference to meaningfulness and are instead framed in terms of linguistic features such as knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. Furthermore, it is in terms of these linguistic criteria that L2 knowledge is almost always assessed.

Ellis (2017) addresses the tension between real-world relevance and classroom necessity by distinguishing between 'tasks' and 'exercises'. He contrasts meaningful tasks with meaningless blank-filling or translation type exercises in which the focus is primarily on language form, there is no communication gap, and there is no outcome other than completing the exercise. In most contexts, teachers must balance along a continuum between tasks that are purely communicative and meaningful and exercises that involve deliberately learning language. In addition to these criteria, another principle that teachers must always address is their practicality, and design tasks that are fair, challenging, and easy for the teacher to manage. When teachers position themselves in classrooms as managers of learning, their role becomes

more facilitative and less pedantic. The adage, *the best way to learn English is to learn it*, rings true. Although teachers have an essential role in guiding the process, the most important contribution they can give to learners in their classrooms is a strong capacity to learn more English and the availability of engaging opportunities to do so.

In sum, this section has focused on discussing the meaningfulness of language learning tasks. The continuum proposed between task and exercise should add useful perspective to teachers in designing their day to day activities.

III. Four Types of Language Learning to Plan into Classes

Another perspective from which to consider, design, and plan language lessons is with regard to the mode of learning that is occurring and the ways that the learners are using the language. A simple framework for such analyses is the Four Strands of language learning (Nation, 2007), in which meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development are balanced into lesson and course design. In this section, each of these four elements will be briefly explained.

Learning through Input. In order to learn through input, most of the English children listen to or read should have already been learned. That is, only 1 or 2 words per 100 should be unknown. When learning through listening and reading, there should be large quantities of interesting input. It is important that most of the language that children listen to or read is already known, so that they can gain some knowledge through context clues and background knowledge. Some examples of this type of learning are extensive reading, shared reading, listening to stories, watching TV or movies, or listening in a conversation.

Learning through Output. In order to learn through language output, children write and talk about what is already familiar to them. The main goal of speaking tasks is for children to try to convey their message to someone else. In this mode of learning, teachers need to manage classroom activities in order to make plenty of opportunities for children to speak and write. Some examples of this mode of learning are keeping diaries, telling stories, or telling someone how to do something.

Language-focused Learning. When children learn this way, they learn strategies and give deliberate attention to language features such as spelling, meaning, and grammatical forms. They process the language features in deep and thoughtful ways, focusing on the rules and meanings of the target language. Furthermore, there should be many reviews of the language

that are studied that are spaced over time, in order to give repeated attention to the same learned language. In language focused learning, it is important that children focus on simple bits of knowledge, not complex systems. Language that is learned this way should connect to listening, reading, speaking, and writing activities. Some examples of this type of learning activity are speech memorization, pronunciation practice, substitution drills, and learning vocabulary from word cards.

Developing Fluency. When learning to develop fluency, all of what children listen to, read, say, or write is familiar to them. When doing such activities, the only focus should be on conveying or understanding meaningful speech or text. There should be some pressure for children to try to perform faster than their usual speed. Another important aspect of this component is that there is a large amount of input or output. Some classic activities used for fluency development are the "4/3/2" activity, repeated speeches, repeated reading, and speed reading.

By referring to these 4 modes of learning, teachers can design courses and plan lessons that will ensure that learners are getting balanced exposure to the target language. Especially, by balancing language focused learning with the other components, teachers can ensure that learners will both increase their knowledge of the target language and also enhance their ability to use it.

IV. Cognitive Features of Language Learning Activities

Another important perspective for analyzing language lessons is with regard to the cognitive features that learners experience when they are doing the activity. Nation and Webb outline a framework for analyzing language learning activity with regard to motivation, noticing, retrieval, creative language use, and elaboration (2011). Considering these aspects, a teacher can deepen their understanding of the conditions that are occurring for learners while they are doing language learning activities.

Motivation. For learners in an English class, an important consideration is the clarity of the language learning goal. While learners may be extrinsically motivated to learn something if they know that they will be tested, often the satisfaction of gaining new knowledge will suffice. For many learners, building vocabulary is motivating because it is tangible and quantifiable. Another issue to consider with regard to motivation is whether the activity makes learning fun and interesting. Conversations about interesting topics that learners are interested in, popular songs, and relevant readings are all ways to make learning more fun and interesting.

Noticing. When doing language learning activities, learners should mostly be focused on relaying and understanding meaning through texts and speech. However, with some careful attention by the teacher, the activity can be enhanced with focused attention on the target language. As learners comprehend meanings, interact with peers, and express themselves, there should be opportunities for them to gain awareness of new language that they can learn. Noticing is a very important first step of the learning process.

Retrieval. If the activity involves retrieval of the learned language, memory of the target form will be greatly enhanced, as will its automatization. If the learners retrieve the learned language a few times, memory will be both strengthened and it will become more readily available for use in real time processing. The best kind of deliberate retrieval is flashcard practice, in which the language target is on one side and the meaning is on the other. Learners prompt themselves to retrieve either the target form or the meaning repeatedly as they practice. Incidental retrieval is probably best facilitated by exposure to reading, but speaking and listening activities also involve retrieval as well.

Creative Language Use and Exposure. After learners have become familiar with newly learned language, they should be given opportunities to use it creatively, in different contexts. This can be productive creative use, wherein learners think of new uses for the learned language themselves, or it can be receptive, wherein they read or listen to the new language in different contexts. Using newly learned language in many different contexts is a very important part of the learning process, integrating it into the interlanguage system.

Elaboration: Thinking Deeply about Language. When learners elaborate about the language they learn, it helps them to build richer memories. Concrete images and mnemonic devices help to strengthen memories. When the target language is tied to a real life example, this also strengthens its representation. Elaboration is most useful if it is combined with repeated retrievals, as this helps to facilitate the automatization of the newly learned items.

V. Applying the Frameworks in Collaborations with Teachers

In this section, applications of the above frameworks will be discussed with regard to three practical collaborations with teachers at Kyoto University of Education's attached elementary and junior high schools. In each collaboration, different aspects of the frameworks became the focus for refining and improving activities in order to enhance the language learning opportunities availed to the learners.

Collaborating with Teacher A. The first collaboration involved Teacher A, a junior high school teacher who was involved in a project focused on building strong ties with the elementary school that her students had graduated from. In this project, teachers from our attached elementary, junior high, and high school collaborated together to present demonstration English lessons at each level of the overall curriculum. There were two elementary school lesson demonstrations, two junior high school demonstrations, and one high school demonstration. The project culminated toward the end of the year in a conference in which these 7 lessons were displayed to around 400 teachers from all over Japan, and followed by focus discussions at each level and lectures from visiting scholars. The 1 year project began in April, and I was assigned to collaborate with Teacher A in June to help her improve her lesson before the public demonstration in November. In our collaboration, we scheduled two lesson observation and feedback sessions, and we also discussed her lesson plan through a series of revisions.

Teacher A was a veteran Japanese teacher, but her work teaching English had just begun. Although this was her first year working at our attached junior high school, she took on the challenge for this project with great enthusiasm, and attended preparation meetings diligently, displaying her keen desire to improve her English teaching methods. As a veteran Japanese teacher, she had great experience in teaching students to appreciate the meanings that language can convey, and the richness that can be shared through reading literature, writing, and discussion. The problem was that she had little experience working with L2 learners, so with regard to second language acquisition she was a novice, and quite unfamiliar with what her students could and could not do. The lesson she originally had planned was thematically linked to the affiliated elementary school teacher's class, and involved introducing their family to them. The target language learning features were grammatical items such as body parts and position.

After observing her first lesson, it became apparent that she needed to extend her L2 teaching toolkit to include the frameworks mentioned above. We worked extensively on improving the overall task design, trying to make it more relevant for the junior high school learners in her class. In the end, the idea of presenting to elementary school children was abandoned because to do so, the junior high school children would have to simplify their language to make it understandable for the much younger elementary level listeners. In the end, she refined the project to one wherein her students communicated with their parents, and also visualized what their future families might be like. Another aspect that helped her was to balance her lesson in terms of the 4 core language learning aspects. By adding paired associate

learning using a vocabulary list, and also using digital flashcard software to present focus vocabulary to the in a stimulating game-like atmosphere. She added a song to the beginning of the lesson for fluency development and also for its motivating aspects. The main part of the lesson involved the students talking to each other as they visualized what they wanted Their future families to be like. She admitted that this was slightly remote for her learners to consider, but she wanted to avoid a situation in which children with difficulties at home were required to present private information that they should not have to share. Her lesson concluded with messages from parents to children displayed on PowerPoint. In this way, revising her lesson with regard to the aforementioned language learning frameworks helped her to make her lesson more relevant to her learners and also involve a more balanced range of opportunities for language learning.

Collaborating with Teacher B. The second collaboration was with Teacher B, who was involved in an annual school-wide research project that similarly began in April and culminated near year-end with a lesson demonstration. Teacher B was a veteran teacher at our attached junior high school, and had participated in such annual school-wide research projects every year either presenting a lesson or as a supporting discussant. At Kyoto Junior School where Teacher B teaches, classroom research is built in to the workload for teachers as part of an annual routine. In contrast with the project that Teacher A was involved in, this project involved all of the school subjects with lesson demonstrations in each at the elementary (grades 1 to 4), middle (grades 5 to 7), and upper levels (grades 8 and 9). As such, the project was more integrated throughout the whole curriculum, with the focus on English being shared with other parallel projects in other subjects such as social studies, math, Japanese, and science.

Teacher B was in her 10th year working at this school, and thus she had extensive experience in this context which made her accustomed to giving such demonstration lessons. She and I committed to the project in June, and similar to the collaboration with Teacher A, we decided on a schedule within which we could discuss her lessons and lesson plans. Because of her extensive experience in doing such projects, working with Teacher B was very different from working with Teacher A; we were able to simply discuss her lesson plan, with much less time spent with actual observation and reflection. Altogether, we discussed her lesson plan 3 times, and I observed her lesson once, a lesson in which she was able to do a kind of practice trial of the exact same activities with a different group of students, and then refine her lesson to demonstrate at the conference.

Teacher B's lesson plan involved a presentation contest in which teams would present different countries around the world and explain why they are attractive places to visit. She organized the lesson to include 4 or 5 members on each team, and each member would make a presentation about one particular aspect of their country. The aspects that were presented for each country were foods, site-seeing places, activities, and an overall summary. Each presentation lasted 2 or 3 minutes, and learners were regularly taught presentation skills such as eye contact, gestures, voice clarity, and interaction with the audience. The presentations were given in a slightly competitive format in which two teams presented and 15 other students sat in the audience and gave holistic peer assessments by deciding which of the two countries looked more attractive. After each individual presentation, Teacher B gave brief feedback comments specifying real examples of student's good eye contact, audience interaction, and the other presentation skills mentioned above that she was teaching during the lesson.

When Teacher B first told me about this lesson plan, I knew it would be a strong lesson because it incorporated important features of task design and seemed like it would be engaging for the students. The task format was very clear and manageable because students were required to condense their presentations onto one A4 sheet that they would present to the whole class on the overhead projector. This simple requirement made it both manageable for her as a teacher and tangible for students as a project. For our first feedback session, the only contribution I could make to help her improve the lesson was to encourage her to make sure that the learners had many opportunities for meaning focused input, both by doing research in books and on the internet, and through interactions with their classmates. As the final date of the lesson presentation got closer, Teacher B grew concerned that the quality of feedback coming from the audience and the class discussion that followed the presentation were not very rich or interesting, and furthermore students were not using language as creatively as they were capable of in the presentations themselves. We discussed this, and Teacher B made a handout incorporating useful phrases for the presenters, and later made a handout to encourage audience interaction. Observing her lesson for the first time, we fine-tuned the overall format to make the presentation contest format clearer to both the students and the observing visitors. In this way, collaborating with Teacher B involved only minor adjustments to her task design, and consideration with regard to balancing between productive, receptive, and interactive learning modes to avail her students to an engaging task that incorporated a variety of language learning opportunities.

The Oral Interpretation Contest (OIC). The OIC is an annual event at the attached junior school, involving students of all ages. Starting in October, children are given stories and speeches to memorize and perform. The OIC is different from a normal speech contest because a great emphasis is put on incorporating emotions, gestures, and dramatic techniques into their speeches. Students are told at the beginning of the project that their speeches and story presentations will be judged according to the 5 following criteria: overall performance, gestures, intonation, fluency, and pronunciation. Referring to these criteria, students practice daily. In November, teachers videotaped the performances and select 8 to 10 finalists in each age group. The event culminates in late November with a school-wide event in which the finalists in each age group present their speeches to all the other students.

Collaborating with teachers for this event was very different from working with individual teachers and was more of a school-wide curricular management perspective. With regard to task design, memorizing a speech or story and presenting in front of the whole school is more toward the pedagogical exercise end of the spectrum, and less of a meaningful task that learners could apply in real-world language use situations. Nevertheless, as the school is highly academic in its focus, students were ready and able to engage in the exercise as an important learning activity. Indeed, memorization is an important aspect within the framework of language learning modes as it involves deliberately memorizing both vocabulary and grammar, repeated retrieval, and fluency development. This project is now in its seventh year, and every year the teachers make slight improvements. Most recently, the project was improved by requiring each age level to memorize a song and sing it together on the final presentation day. Songs are chosen that have good grammar and express clear emotions. On the final day, some of the key phrases from the songs are explained to the learners, and they practice pronouncing them with natural pronunciation and intonation. In sum, deliberate language focused learning activities are the main focus of this school wide project. Students do more meaning focused activities in other parts of the curriculum to balance among the learning modes and cognitive features.

VI. Conclusion

An important aspect of the teaching profession is that it offers opportunities for teachers to constantly improve their lessons. For many teachers, the lessons they teach each week will be revisited with new students the following year. By working hard to improve their lessons every year, teachers can also rest assured that their hard work will also pay off in years to come.

Reflecting on each of the three frameworks explained above provides a strong sounding board for teachers to refer to as they examine their lessons critically. By considering task design, they can make their lessons more relevant and purposeful. By designing lessons according to the four learning modes, they can balance the learning opportunities they provide. By analyzing the cognitive features that their activities involve, they can more deeply understand the learning that occurs in their classes.

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