

Task-Based Language Learning

—An Effective Approach for Teaching English
for the International Tourism and International Service Industry—

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This paper will focus on increasing awareness related to the acquisition of English as a second language. In particular, concerning the international tourism and the international service industry, second language acquisition continues to be an increasingly meaningful issue. Various pedagogical factors shall be considered while also attempting to examine various cultural factors. Allowing for an insightful understanding will benefit pupils during a communicative, collaborative process of second language acquisition. Notions of communicating and relating with people on a professional level through the use of formal spoken and formal written English will also be explored. Formal intercultural and formal interpersonal communicative skills in a second language are a prerequisite for international tourism and international service industry workers.

English, to some extent, may be considered the lingua franca for numerous segments of the international tourism and international service industry around the world. Various countries around the world have extensive English language education programs at various levels in a variety of academic settings. While exploring the issue of second language acquisition and task based pedagogical activities, it is beneficial to consider the fact that this lingua franca is also spoken by large numbers of non-native speakers of English. Task-based language learning is one methodology which will increase competence and improve ability. The given that international tourism and international service industry

workers in Japan need to be able to effectively communicate with foreign individuals who are traveling in this country further demonstrates the magnitude of this broader educational issue beyond the single, conventional role of English as a second language.

Task-based approaches and cooperative frameworks applicable for learning English as a second language provide students with the opportunity to be focused mentally while maintaining a high input environment. Further, as other opportunities to acquire English naturally are often limited in Japan, learners will benefit from a communicative and collaborative atmosphere in class. Addressing and attending to the particular needs of ESL/EFL learners in Japan is necessary, vital, and beneficial. These needs will vary from classroom to classroom and they will vary from educational setting to educational setting. Individual classroom needs, in some cases, may effectively be determined by the individual educator in consultation with learners. Learners need to identify, choose, and maintain clear goals during their language learning process. Task-based activities, as an addition to a comprehensive, communicative, collaborative curriculum, offer another beneficial opportunity to exercise various aspects of language. Further, it should be carefully noted that a curriculum which has a clear set of goals and students who have a clear sense of linguistic purpose will be at an advantage in comparison with students unguided by a structured, functional, notional, communicative framework, sincere integrative motivation, realistic

instrumental motivation, and a true desire for academic knowledge.

Motivation, Individual Learners, and Task-Based Pedagogy

Motivation allows learners to define their individuality in terms of their personal aspirations and personal goals toward learning English as a second language. These goals need to be identified, clarified, and sustained by the pupil during the learning process. This identification needs to be made by the learner. The empowerment of learners is, in many ways, rather tangible in the individual ability to choose to pursue a particular career path. Choosing to aspire to work in the international tourism and international service industry requires students to make sincere efforts to improve their second language skills and their ability to communicate effectively and professionally. Acquiring a high level of skill using formal, professional, and polite English smoothly and properly requires extensive practice. A simple and beneficial task-based activity is a communication building-block task. Such activities help students who desire and aspire to work in the international tourism and service industry to practice courteous English. The activity discussed here is a practical pedagogical tool that enables learners to practice, examine, and reflect on their choice of words, syntax, pronunciation, and intonation during their active, in-class language learning process. Communication building-block tasks are useful for lower level pupils, helping them to improve and to master polite, service English, while also promoting greater interpersonal communication.

Interpersonal communicative skills on a professional level are essential for people working in the international tourism and international service industry. Due to the fact that there are significantly different values concerning linguistic behavior, Ishii and Bruneau (1991) carefully stipulate that :

“Different norms of appropriate communicative behavior exist [across cultures], and a variety of

intercultural misunderstandings can occur if one does not know when, where, and how to remain silent. To promote natural and effective interaction, especially with Japanese, people in the United States need to learn to feel more comfortable in situations where silence and vagueness prevail. Learning the general rules for silence plays a more important part than generally thought for all people attempting to communicate successfully across cultures” (p. 317).

Their conclusion is especially insightful for English related to the international tourism and international service industry as it brings forth concepts and tenets concerning interpersonal communicative variations. Classroom activities which are founded on task-based, communicative, collaborative approaches will aid the educator toward increasing learner awareness, understanding, and comprehension.

Depending on the particular goals of the course, communication building-block tasks may best be implemented as part of an active, student-fronted, communicative approach. The ability to use polite English effectively and correctly is a necessary skill for people who work in the international tourism and international service industry. The ability to speak formal English is critical and requires extensive practice. Practical practice that aids learners in acquiring this particular language skill should focus on syntax, sentence structure, pronunciation, and intonation. Practice is necessary for various significant reasons. Some thought provoking opinions were pointed out by Buckley (2001) who is rather clear and concise while carefully examining, discussing, and labeling several types of communicative interaction. She points out how she

“. . . found that a number of fundamental Japanese cultural values led to classroom behavior which contrasted sharply with expected classroom behavior in the United States. The behaviors which most seriously impact language learning include : Difficulty in stating opinions and disagreeing. Hesitating before answering and si-

lence in class. Giving indirect, ambiguous responses. Reticence in asking for clarification. Dependence upon the teacher and lack of autonomy in learning. Difficulty in answering open-ended questions and participating in loosely structured activities” (p. 3).

Activities which are, to some extent, structured in nature and consistent in purpose will effectively aid the acquisition and comprehension of formal and polite English. Formal and polite English loses effectiveness if simple grammatical mistakes are made. Tremendous care needs to be taken to avoid pronunciation errors while speaking in a professional setting. A well spoken international tourism and international service industry worker should be able to control their polite language assiduously. Various formulaic expressions need to be produced automatically, expertly, and professionally.

Professional Discourse, Second Language Learning, and Informative Intercultural Communication

Professional, polite English is different from the casual, friendly discourse most often used in the ESL/EFL classroom. Further, formal, service English is also distinct from the scholastic style of English students usually study and use while writing academic papers. Indeed, polite service expressions and professional utterances represent a distinct form of communication. This distinct form of communication needs to be examined from a variety of perspectives and numerous views need to be explored. Nimmannit (1998) asserts that in various public situations in Asian societies silence is still highly valued. She goes on to say that in numerous cases

“. . .only when one has something meaningful and important to say should one venture to open one’s mouth. In other words, it is better to seek anonymity within the group rather than risk ridicule by speaking out on one’s own” (p. 37).

Learners must definitively understand the difference between simple informal phrases, polite phrases, and total discourse competence while communicating in English. This includes the ideas Nimmannit illuminates. Indeed, the styles of communication for various professional situations need to be examined by learners in a communicative, collaborative, humanistic, intercultural, and interpersonal setting.

Various cultures need to be understood, appreciated, and accepted by everyone involved with higher learning. Learners should be required to compare and contrast various cultures. Deeper knowledge concerning different cultures invariably affects classroom behavior and classroom atmosphere. The idea that everyone in the world needs to understand and appreciate numerous cultures can not be emphasized enough. Creating a positive learning atmosphere and maintaining the interest of the pupils will be better provided for when everyone makes an effort and a commitment to understand and appreciate various cultures and various countries. Learners also benefit from experiencing a new culture in their English language classroom. Further, both cultures, that of the educator and that of the learner, also need to be accepted, appreciated, and understood if true interpersonal and intercultural communication is to take place.

Cultural Factors, Classroom Atmosphere, International Communication Styles, and Interpersonal Discourse

Anderson (1993) examined and explained that the following traits nurtured a conundrum within an ESL classroom for some English educators. The characteristics suggested add support to Buckley’s thesis by explaining the way in which students seldom initiated discussion, generally avoided bringing up new topics, refused to challenge the opinion of their instructor, rarely asked questions for clarification, and would not voluntarily provide answers. Anderson points out how pupils

“. . . seldom volunteer answers, a trait that

many Western instructors find extremely frustrating. Most Japanese will only talk if specifically called upon, and only then if there is a clear-cut answer. But even if the answer is obvious, it may be preceded by a pause so long that the instructor is tempted to supply the answer first. This type of pause— or even a true silence— does not necessarily signify an unwillingness to comply, but may simply indicate that the student is too nervous to respond, or too uncertain of the answer to risk public embarrassment” (p. 102).

Indeed, learners need to be taught that their own natural, native speaking styles and natural, native English speaking styles may be essentially different. This issue is critical to learners of English for a specific purpose, such as those who desire to use English professionally in the international tourism and service industry. Pausing too long, or an inability to respond quickly and effectively may result in a gross misunderstanding that the service worker is not trying to provide capable and effective service for her or his customer or client. This may be especially true for people who work as travel agents, tour guides, hotel workers, airport ground staff, transportation host staff, tourist information center workers, currency exchange bank workers, theme park workers, international event staff, souvenir shop workers, general shop keepers, and restaurant workers. Their international clients and international customers, being travelers, generally have very little knowledge or familiarity with various interpersonal communication styles in Japan.

Various articles address students’ shyness or unwillingness to speak in more detail. (Williams (1994), Miller (1995), Nimmannit (1998), and Mayer (1999) Williams (1994) connects student reticence to some aspects of the educational system in Japan which

“. . . has often been cited as a reason for a student’s inhibition about speaking during class activities. Traditionally the technique employed in most classrooms is of a lecture style, where the

teacher remains standing behind a desk at the front of the class and the students receive information as the teacher lectures. Little input is ever solicited from the students, and it is instilled that a classroom is a place where one listens and learns but does not speak” (p. 10).

Typical learners and indeed stereotypical educators around the world are familiar with a classroom atmosphere that neither stimulates nor fosters an exchange of information or opinions. Rather, this hypothetically presented, stereotypical atmosphere leans toward the requirement of an acquisition of knowledge and information. It is this atmosphere that few, rather than many, are most familiar with today. It should also be noted that this situation is contrary to the pace of the exchange of information and the pace of the exchange of personal opinions often present in interpersonal and intercultural communication using English. This factor is especially significant and needs to be considered extremely carefully for and by people aspiring to work in the international tourism and international service industry.

Zimbardo (1977), who has done extensive research with regards to shyness, suggests that

“. . . our studies show that shyness is more prevalent in Japan and Taiwan than in any other culture we surveyed. Among the Japanese, 57 percent reported being currently shy, as compared to 53 percent of the Taiwanese. For three-fourths of the Japanese, shyness is viewed as a “problem,” over 90 percent report having labeled themselves as shy in the past or currently, and, more than any other nationality, the Japanese report feeling shy in virtually all social situations. . . . [although] more Japanese subjects than any other group reported that they like being shy and extolled its positive consequences. . . this twenty percent of the population is, nevertheless, in the minority” (pp. 212–213).

While this statistical analysis is quite dated, learners today may genuinely believe that their shyness is a

factor in their experiences with English as a second language. In a more recent article, Zimbardo (1981) defines shyness in depth as

“. . . a mental attitude that predisposes people to be extremely concerned about the social evaluation of them by others. As such, it creates a keen sensitivity to cues of being rejected. There is a readiness to avoid people and situations that hold any potential for criticism of the shy person's appearance or conduct. It involves keeping a low profile by holding back from initiating actions that might call attention to one's self" (p. 9).

This statement is particularly fascinating as it is concerning people in the general population. In this way, the statement may hold more truth as an essential understanding of culture. Classroom situations, however, are unique in society as they allow learners to exist in a culture unlike their own. In some cases, students feel liberated and unrestrained while speaking English as a foreign language or while speaking English as a second language interpersonally. Professional discourse is singular and distinct from this communication. Zimbardo (1977) further stated that

“. . . in the classroom, there are students who know the answer and want to make a good impression on the teacher, but something keeps their hands down and stifles their voices. They are inhibited from acting because of inner commands from the guard-self: "You'll look ridiculous; people will laugh at you; this is not the place to do that; . . . you'll be safe only if you are seen and not heard." And the prisoner-within decides not to risk the dangerous freedom of a spontaneous life and meekly complies" (pp. 2-3).

The metaphor used may be excessive, yet it is particularly insightful while considering the actual atmosphere present in some classrooms. Classroom

culture often plays a significant role in a learner's long term motivation. A deeper understanding of the atmosphere and classroom culture that the students in the class are most used to attending may prove to be beneficial for people teaching English as a second language. Zimbardo (1977) continues by suggesting that

“. . . we find children are made to feel that their worth and the love they desire from adults is contingent on their performance. They have to prove they are deserving in a world where success is modestly taken for granted and rewards are given sparingly, where failures are magnified in the spotlight of shame. Children of shyness-generating societies are often not encouraged to express their ideas or feelings openly, nor given adequate opportunity to interact with adults or play freely with their peers" (pp. 220-221).

Numerous learners have had various learning experiences related to or attributed to the points made previously by Zimbardo. In this way, even modern students may find it quite challenging to alter and adapt their view of education and classroom learning. Through a variety of learning activities based on a variety of pedagogical techniques, learners need to increase their ability to speak English formally to effectively feel confident while attempting to learn English as a second language.

This task-based, communicative technique requires learners to create expressions and to solve communication building-block tasks. This will explicitly show and implicitly illuminate formal English usage while attempting to reduce inherent shyness. Further, this activity will increase confidence. A simple communication building-block task would be presented to learners who would then be requested to arrange the words in the correct order to form a service English expression. Within a communication building-block task format, the punctuation is placed first, followed by the words placed alphabetically. This provides a systematic way of creating

random tasks. Students should work collaboratively in pairs or in small groups while attempting to complete this simple communication building–block task. By realizing and formulating one correct order, learners are given the opportunity to explore one pattern of polite English. This activity may easily be expanded upon by breaking down entire dialogs sentence by sentence, randomly placing them together, and requiring pupils to solve them as a group cooperatively. This allows students to become peer teachers, builds a greater, collaborative classroom community, and improves overall discourse competence communicatively. After learners understand the manner in which communication building–block tasks are formed and solved, they should be required to create their own tasks using student–generated dialogs. Consequently, they will have the chance to examine their own work again while collaboratively solving their classmates’ communication building – block tasks. During this phase of the activity, students who study English for the international tourism and international service industry will be able to inherently raise their consciousness relative to formal language usage. Examining discourse that their peers have generated provides a unique, meaningful learning opportunity and empowers pupils.

Another goal, accomplished through this type of practice using communication building–block tasks, is improving the ability to use proper, polite intonation. Polite intonation is also an essential skill for people working in the international tourism and international service industry. As Warschauer (2000) suggests how :

“Just as businesses and media have experienced globalization and relocalization, so has the English language. The past few decades have seen a growth in the role of English around the world as the lingua franca for economic and scientific exchange” (p. 513).

In order to be able to speak effectively and politely, students need to learn how to use formal intonation. Students have the chance to exercise their pronun-

ciation, intonation, and stress pattern skills after rebuilding their communication building–block tasks. Communication building–block tasks may best be utilized as an addition to a series of communicative tasks accomplishing the goal of increasing skills related to using polite English. However, as Rajagopalan (2000) has stated :

“There is an urgent need to rethink some of these wider issues concerning the spread of English as the world’s leading lingua franca. At the very least, there is an urgent need to free EFL teachers all over the world from the guilt complex likely to arise from suspicion that they have been unwittingly acting as quislings at the service of an invisible incorporeal imperial power, determined to smother and suffocate all other languages on the face of this earth and their corresponding cultures” (p. 5).

Having students solve communication building–block tasks created from their own dialog writing will improve their ability to use formal, polite English. This activity is flexible in nature and may be used in any way which best suits an individual teacher’s needs. Further, Warschauer (2000) points out how

“. . . we should view English as a tool which connects people around the world and provides a means to struggle and to give meaning to those connections. If English is imposing the world on our students, we as TESOL professionals can enable them, through English, to impose their voices on the world” (p. 530).

Task–based activities give learners the opportunity to actively practice in a communicative setting while improving a necessary professional and intercultural language skill. This collaborative activity integrates all of the four basic skills while also integrating notions of process and product. Student–generated communication building–block tasks not only improve student’s expressive skills in determining, communicating, and negotiating the meaning of their

intended message, but also allow for deeper cognitive development and better professional service.

Cultural Context Realities, Pedagogical Adaptations, and Learner Responsibilities

Proper and effective verbal interactions in an international work place require an extensive understanding and appreciation of foreign cultures and context. Concerning the international tourism and international service industry this concept of context is quite critical. There are numerous historical and cultural explanations that can be taken into account when explaining various types of verbal exchange and verbal interactions around the world in a variety of cultures and settings. An especially significant area which needs detailed exploration is context. Hall investigated behavior within the domain of high context and low context cultures. Hall believes that

“... high-context people are well informed and maintain extensive information networks to insure their being abreast of the latest developments; they require a minimum of background information” (1990, p. 180).

Hall also points out that

“... most of the information is either in the physical context or initialized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message” (1976, p. 79).

In low context language societies, conversations necessitate explicit rather than implicit communication styles (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997). The culture of the learners needs to be understood and appreciated in detail as well. This is a very critical point for effective second language education. In addition, the culture of the international tourism and international service industry needs to be explicitly understood and implicitly appreciated. This context of communication is especially unique due to the various opin-

ions people have concerning travel and due to the various types of people who travel with different purposes.

Sower (1999) points out how the Internet and high technology seem to be bringing cultures and people closer together. However, he asserts how the attitudes and practices of the world's diverse cultures are not keeping pace with this. Although the transformation to using one language for world-wide intercommunication is taking place rapidly, culture

“... accretes. It builds up over hundreds, if not thousands, of years. It consists of the traditions, languages, religions, folk ways, customs and habits of a people handed down over generations. While attitudes may change from year to year, the fundamental values of a society do not. Changes occur slowly. Like a large body of water, the surface temperature may be affected by the prevailing winds, but the temperature at deeper levels remains more stable” (p. 737).

In addition to this, and thinking about the international tourism and international service industry, classroom practices need to be considered further. Students who study English for the international tourism and international service industry need to speak out and participate more during the various phases of second language acquisition and during the learning process. Participating in class actively will build up confidence and increase learner awareness concerning the differences in speaking styles. Allowing students to speak out, voice their own opinions, and alter the classroom atmosphere will benefit the entire second language learning process. Classroom atmosphere is critical. Williams (1994) also provides various views and opinions, such as how

“... the EFL teacher wishing to effect this change should develop ways to communicate both. Methods of communicating such ideas can depend largely on the individual personality of the teacher; however, tone of voice, body language, and conversational style are important

tools" (p. 11).

In terms of classroom atmosphere and specifically concerning English education for individuals who aspire to work in the international tourism and the international service industry, great care needs to be taken to develop a comprehensive, communicative, collaborative, humanistic framework. This, along with a detailed, cooperative understanding of various cultures will aid students during their second language learning process.

Conclusion

Specifically addressing the role of second language

acquisition for the international tourism and service industry, educators and learners share a clear purpose. Motivation is shared in terms of benefiting learners and creating a positive, cooperative classroom atmosphere. Cultural, intercultural, and interpersonal communicative factors need to continue to be considered while exploring any specific, beneficial, task-based pedagogical activity created for individuals who study English for a future career in the international tourism and international service industry. Further research needs to be done and should provide an opportunity to explore various issues related to this topic in more detail.

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