Making Good Tasks Better

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In an earlier article in the *MEXTESOL Journal* [2], I described some ways that I use to choose the most appropriate task for classroom work. I began by comparing two tasks which it will be useful to describe again here. The tasks were:

At the museum

Students work in pairs. Student A wants to find out when the museum opens, when it closes, etc. Student B has information about the museum. Student A then asks Student B.

A question poster

The students look at pictures of some animals and learn their names. The teacher then draws a circle on a large piece of paper, writes 'Animal World' in the centre, and adds a question on a line from the circle, 'What do whales eat?'. The teacher then says to the class:

"Look at the pictures in your book. What questions do YOU have about the animals?"

Students suggest questions and the teacher adds them to the circle. When quite a few questions are on the paper, the teacher says:

"Look at these questions. I want you to try to find the answers. Ask your friends, look in books, ask your parents, ask your other teachers - see what you can find out. At the end of every lesson, we can spend 5 or 10 minutes to see what answers you have found."

Over the next few lessons, the teacher asks the students what answers they have found. A student or the teacher writes these answers in simple English on piece of paper, and sticks them next to the question on the Question Poster.

Comparing the two tasks, I showed how we can judge how much 'value' a task has by asking ourselves four questions:

Does the task have value beyond language learning?
Are students personally involved?
Is the students' personal contribution significant?
Will the task produce 'a unique classroom'?

With the first question, we can see that, in addition to language, the question poster task also has *educational* value since the students will be learning many other things at the same time–information about animals, library skills, working with others, formulating hypotheses and so on—something that is missing in the first task. We can also see that the question poster task makes the students personally involved as it is *their* questions which are the focus and *their* answers which are important. In this way we can see that the question poster task is likely to produce a 'unique classroom', in which the outcome of the task will change depending on who the

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[2] Vol. 21, No. 3. Winter, 1998. pp. 59-63.

students are. We can contrast this with the 'standardised classroom' of the museum task, which is likely to lead to the same results regardless of who the students are, their culture, or the country they are in.

Dimensions of tasks

Looking closely at the museum task and the question poster task, we can see some important differences. We can draw these together in what I call 'dimensions' of tasks which will help us to see what a task offers—and how we can improve it.

Value beyond language learning

The first dimension measures the value that a task might have in addition to language learning. At one end, we can place 'language specific goals'—that is, the students will mainly be learning language—so much so that if they are already proficient in the language area of the task (e. g., question forms) then *the task will have no value.* At the other end, we can place a much broader value: 'wider educational goals', which will mean that even if the students are proficient in the language area of the task, *the task will still have value.* Tasks might fall anywhere between these two points, although in the museum and question poster tasks we can see examples of each of the end points - if the students are already proficient in the question form, for example, then there would be no point doing the museum task but the question poster task would still be worthwhile.

Value beyond language learning

Language specific goals ----------Wider educational goals.

Looking at tasks in this way, we see clearly that we can improve a task if we can give it educational value. We might do this, for example, by using more educational content (instead of a fictional museum, for example, students might be asking about important real places) or by making students search for answers.

The role of the learner

One of the most striking things about the museum task, is that the students hardly have to think at all. Everything is supplied by the task and all the students have to do is apply a grammatical rule to make questions and read the information from the book. In contrast, the question poster task asks the students to supply almost everything. Thinking of the tasks in this way, we suggest two more points to analyse tasks.

The role of the learner

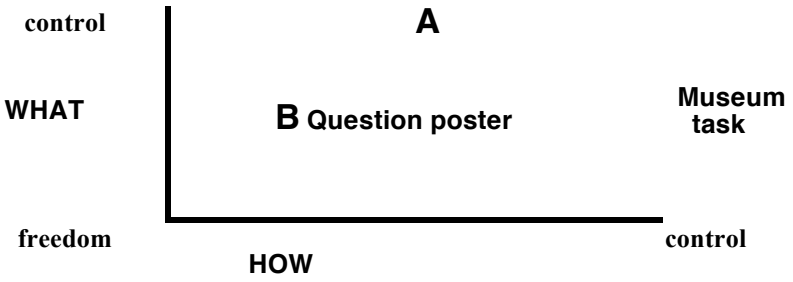
consumer---------- ----------**producer**

ideas and language supplied by the task ideas and language supplied by the learner

Again, we can see immediately that we might be able to improve a task if can increase the amount of ideas and language that the students are expected to produce. In the museum task, for example, instead of giving the students everything, we might ask them what questions they would ask and ask them to invent the information. We could also say, "Imagine you are going to a big city tomorrow. Where would you go? What questions would you need to ask in each place?".

Free and controlled work

My final two dimensions look more closely at the design of a task. Every task has two elements: *what*, that is, the content or topic (e. g., museums, animals, etc.) and *how* (e. g.,, information gap in pairs, brainstorming with the whole class). For each element, we can see how much 'freedom' or 'control' there is for the student. We can then we put these two elements next to each other, and build a graph, like this:



Thinking about the museum task, for example, we can see that there is a lot of control over *what* the students say and *how* they work. This means that, on the graph, we can probably put it at point A. The question poster task, however, is rather different. There is still some control over what they say (they must ask about animals, for example) and some control over how they produce the questions and find the answers, but the task gives the students a lot more freedom. We might then say that the task is probably about point B on the graph.

The aim of language teaching

At this point we can ask ourselves an important question: *What is the ultimate aim of language teaching?* There are many ways in which we can answer that question but most teachers would probably agree that we hope that students will be able to understand and produce the language that they want or need to. In other words, we can say that the ultimate aim of language teaching is *to develop the student's autonomy in language use.* If we think about this in terms of the graph, we can see that what we are aiming for is 'freedom' in language use in terms of both 'how' and 'what'—that is that the students can use and understand language without the need for any external control or support.

The implication of this is that in the classroom we need to be working towards the bottom left of the graph—'freedom' in language use. Rather than focusing on ways of controlling the language and ideas that students produce we should always be looking for ways to 'free things up'. This also means that we should be looking for ways to move the students from a role as a 'consumer' in the classroom towards a role as 'producer'. In doing this, we are also likely to move away from 'language specific' work and instead involve the students in broader educational processes.

Practical ideas

To end this article, I want to show five simple ideas that begin to make these changes in classroom work. These are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Practical ideas

1. Do a task, make a task
After doing an exercise, students write a similar exercise for other students (for example, a matching exercise). They can exchange exercises or the exercises can be kept in box so that students can take one if they have time to spare.

2. Do a test, make a test
After doing a simple test, students can write part of a test themselves. With the teacher, they can agree what they have covered during the last few lessons. Different groups can take responsibility for writing different parts of the test. The teacher can collect the parts of the test, correct them, put them together and give them back to the students as their test.

3 Stimulate the students questions first.
Before reading or listening to a text, the students can suggest questions that they would like the text to answer—i.e. they can produce their own 'comprehension questions'.

4 Stimulate answers first
If a text comes with comprehension questions, the students can try to answer the questions *before* they read the text. Usually this means that they will have to invent details. They can then read the text to compare ideas.

5 Do a task, share outcomes, make a questionnaire.
If the students produce a short text about something (e. g., a paragraph about their favourite animal), they can write a few questions about it (e. g., 'Where does my parrot live?' or 'What is the name of my cat?'). The teacher can then collect these questions and put them on the board ('Where does Cristina's cat live?' etc). The students' texts can then be stuck on the wall and the students can move around the classroom trying to find the answers to each question.

Each of these ideas involves very small changes in classroom work but we can see that in each one, the students are making a step from 'consumer' towards 'producer', from 'language specific' work towards 'wider educational' goals', and are moving from the top right of the graph towards the bottom left - from control towards freedom. None of these ideas implies a 'revolution', but they each offer significant changes in classroom work. In a future article in this journal I will take some of these ideas further and show how we can strengthen the 'educational' value of language teaching.