

# Advantages of Two-phased Tasks in the EFL Classroom

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## I. Introduction

Task-based instruction (henceforth TBI) which consists of three-phased tasks; pre-, during-, and post-tasks, has been popular since ESL/EFL educators acknowledged the importance of the communicative approach. The framework, however, is neither satisfactory nor successful in all classrooms, especially EFL classrooms. For example, teachers' roles are unclear, and learners are likely to regard tasks as mere games or exercises. They tend not to take them seriously because neither entrance examinations nor TOEIC tests pay attention to the speaking competence dealt with in the tasks. Moreover, the objectives of the three-phased task can be process-oriented rather than learner-centered. Teachers tend to be interested in planning and completing tasks without considering about how to deal with the learners' output.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the validity of pre-task planning and suggest excluding it for more authentic task implementation in EFL education. First, I will define "task" and review the literature. The following section will discuss the shortcomings of three-phased tasks and the advantages of two-phased tasks. Finally, language activation tasks based on the two-phased framework will be demonstrated as an example of adult EFL learners. Issues of evaluation or research are

beyond the scope of this paper.

## II. Definition of Task

There are varieties of definitions concerning “task” which makes discussion complicated. Some of the definitions are as follows:

- 1 . A task is a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward. Thus examples of tasks include painting a fence, dressing a child.... In other words, by ‘task’ is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life at work, at play, and in between (Long, 1985).
- 2 . An activity which requires learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought and which allows teachers to control and regulate that process is regarded as a ‘task’ (Prabhu, 1987).
- 3 . A piece of classroom work which includes learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language, while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form (Nunan, 1989).
- 4 . Tasks are always activities where target language is used by the learner for a communication purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome (Willis, 1996).
- 5 . A task is an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective (Bygate, Skehan & Swain, 2001).

Among several definitions, Skehan’s following definition summarizes all the above.

A task is an activity in which 1. meaning is primary, 2. learners are not given other people's meanings to regurgitate, 3. there is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities, 4. task completion has some priority, and 5. the assessment of the task is in terms of outcome (1996).

In this paper, I will deal with tasks based on Skehan's definition as shown above. In the next section, I will examine previous studies.

### III. Previous Studies

Ellis (2003), among others, asserts that a task involves phases reflecting the chronology of task-based lessons, that is, pre-task, during-task, and post-task. Ellis claims that planning should be included either before or during the task. Pre-task planning is called "strategic planning" or "off-line planning", while during-task planning is called "on-line planning" (Ellis, 2003:25). Ellis takes the position that focus on form in learners' planning is as necessary as focus on meaning and shows the effect of planning on accuracy and complexity of learners' narrative production (Ellis, 1987, cited in Ellis, 2005:190). According to his research, careful planning promotes complexity and accuracy. However, he admits that the relationship between planning and acquisition of language can only be theoretically based due to the absence of empirical support (Ellis, 2005:27).

Willis (1996), like other researchers, supports the three-phased task, however, the procedure is different from the general three-phased task in terms of the name of categorization and where planning should occur. For example, during-task is called 'task cycle' which includes

task (i.e., students do the task in pairs or small groups), planning (i.e., students prepare to report how they completed the task and what they decided or discovered) and report (i.e., teacher selects some groups to present their reports of the task to the class, orally or in writing). Furthermore, the post-task is called ‘language focus’ which includes analysis and practice. Figure 1 shows the difference in the categorizations.

<b>*General task phase</b>		
<b>PRE</b>	<b>DURING</b>	<b>POST</b>
<i>strategic planning</i> <i>framing the activity</i>	<i>on-line planning</i> <i>time pressure</i>	<i>learner report</i> <i>repeat the task</i> <i>Consciousness-raising</i>
<b>*Willis's task phase (adapted from Willis, 1996)</b>		
<b>PRE</b>	<b>TASK CYCLE</b>	<b>LANGUAGE FOCUS</b>
<i>introduction to topic</i> <i>and task</i>	<i>task + planning + report</i>	<i>analysis + practice</i>

Figure 1

Compared to the general task phase, Willis’s task framework places ‘reporting’ within the ‘task cycle’ (i.e., during task). Furthermore, the planning is incorporated in the task cycle which differs from strategic planning (i.e., planning in the pre-task) and on-line planning (i.e., planning during the task). The planning that Willis presents is neither of these. By ‘planning’ she means, preparing to present a report to a larger audience.

Both of these frameworks intend to focus on form either during- or

post-task, while the major objective of the task remains to focus on meaning, not on form. Although most of the researchers including Ellis and Willis emphasize the necessity of a pre-task phase, Skehan (1998, cited in Swan, 2005:391) claims that by focusing on form, it is impossible to predict the natural use of language in tasks, and that pressuring learners to use particular structures renders tasks so unnatural that he has a question whether they enhance acquisition. Swan (2005) also questions the effect of task-based instruction in which 'teachers teach learners what they need to know', and asserts that 'the thrust of TBI is to cast the teacher in the role of a manager and facilitator of communication activity rather than an important source of new language (391)'.

The pursuit of 'focus on form' originally comes from interest in gathering research data of 'task-in-process (Seedhouse, 2005)'. Seedhouse (2005) points out that recent discussion has centered upon the change of conceptualization either in 'task-in-process' for research data collection or in 'task-as-workplan' as syllabus. In my opinion, as Seedhouse points out, ESL/EFL tend to pay too much attention to the task itself, ignoring problems which occur in an actual classroom. In the next section, I will discuss the problems of the three-phased task.

#### **IV. Problems of Three-phased Task**

The three-phased task presents universal and culture-specific problems. Both are possible obstacles to the successful implementation of task-based instruction.

## **A. Universal Problems**

### **1. Deficiency of authentic environment**

Pre-tasks decrease authentic environment because they often force learners to focus on form before the actual interaction.

### **2. Deficiency of time**

In 45- or 60- minute classes, learners are exposed to a tight schedule to complete the assigned framework. For example, teachers take several minutes to introduce the task in the 'pre-task' and learners are asked to participate in the 'during-task' on which learners often tend to spend more time than the teachers had expected. As a result, the post-task, which is a crucially important part, is often omitted.

### **3. Limitation in meeting needs of focusing on form**

According to Skehan (2003), there are three types of learners: analytic, memory-based and balanced. To meet the needs of focusing on form through TBI, teachers must provide chances for any type of learners to analyze the output or to receive teacher instruction. However, the three-phased task tends to exclude post-task in which learners are supposed to focus on form.

## **B. Culture-specific Problems**

### **1. EFL learners' interdependence**

Interdependent learners from high context cultures are not accustomed to explaining or negotiating meaning. In their L1 interaction, they generally do not ask for confirmation or clarification as often as native speakers of English do. Japanese EFL learners are generally too polite to ask questions even when they need to. Some learners might even think that it is face-threatening to ask the interlocutor for more in-

formation in public; others believe that 'silence is golden.'

Kunda (1999) notes as follows:

An interdependent self embraces its assigned role, focuses on social duties and obligations, and tries to figure out what others are thinking and feeling so as to best meet their expectations. One acts in accordance with these anticipated expectations of others rather than in accordance with one's own wishes and desires; indeed, acting on one's own wishes is viewed as infantile (519).

In this type of cultural background, it is difficult for hesitant learners to interact freely and to focus on meaning without being overly concerned with grammatical mistakes.

## 2. EFL learners' educational background

Japanese EFL learners are supposed to take entrance examinations in their final year of junior and senior high school. Both of these entrance examinations now include a listening section but not a speaking section, although the TOEIC test which adults, including university learners, often take will test speaking performance as an option in the near future.

Many learners therefore do not find it necessary to be involved in task interactions that emphasize speaking and listening. Future tests are not likely to focus on their speaking performance. Therefore, EFL learners tend to see a task as a mere game or exercise that they do not have to take seriously. According to my pilot survey of 16 senior high school students, 68.8% claimed to learn more in a teacher-fronted than in a learner-centered class. Also, 62.5% of the learners replied that a teacher-fronted class is more effective because the content targets the

entrance examination. They favorably commented that tasks are enjoyable for a change or refreshment; there is no evidence that they positively evaluate learner-centered tasks.

### 3. EFL teachers' predisposition

Some EFL teachers who see themselves as group members do not realize that the group norms (e.g., norms as Japanese nationals) influence their attitudes. Those teachers are likely to seek uniformity or convergence. They might unconsciously encourage learners to follow the same attitude as group members and discourage them from diverging. Without teachers' support for individuality over conformity, it is not easy for learners to find ways to be interactive and independent in class.

To resolve the problems shown above, I will explain the structure and function of a two-phased task based on theories in the next section.

## V. Theoretical Background

### A. Socio-psychological perspective

#### 1. Zone of proximal development

Vigotsky (1978) proposed the concept of "zone of proximal development". It defines those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation. The actual development level characterizes mental development retrospectively, while the zone of proximal development characterizes mental development prospectively (86).

On the other hand, Semin (2004) distinguishes three different levels of analysis: individual, inter-individual and group. The individual level looks at the relationship between language and cognition; the inter-



individual level deals with the language as a tool for doing and transferring reality by conveying meaning. Shared knowledge is critical in terms of facilitating the achievement of the group's goal (Semin, 2004:223).

Both Vigotsky and Semin examine the communication mechanism between or among individuals rather than the psychological communication mechanism in culture-specific contexts. Therefore, I will introduce a theory that deals with the socio-psychological aspect of interaction which applies to culture-specific contexts.

## 2. Social identity theory

According to social identity theory, "people are motivated to preserve a positive sense of self. One of the ways that people can achieve such a positive self-identity is from their membership in social groups (Cooper, Kelly & Weaver, 2004:250)". Markus and Kitayama (1991) point out that people in collectivist countries are generally more sensitive to their social ties and to the expectations of their referent others (cited in Kunda, 1999:519).

As for the learners' intentions during the exercise, Terry and Hogg (1996, study 1) significantly predicted students' behavioral intentions to engage in exercise as those who strongly identified with the relevant group (peers at the university) (cited in Cooper, Kelly & Weaver, 2004:251). Learners who strongly identify themselves with group members therefore behave accordingly while performing the task.

To summarize, learners from high context culture who learn in groups tend to care more about what other group members think or how they behave than about their own learning. This might influence the learners' level of processing.

## **B. Cognitive perspective: Levels of processing theory**

According to Craik and Lockhart (1972), there are various levels of processing ranging from shallow or physical analysis of a stimulus (e.g., detecting specific letters in words) to deep or semantic analysis. The crucial notion of depth of processing was clarified by Craik (1973:48, cited in Eysenck, 2001). 'Depth' is defined in terms of the meaningfulness extracted from the stimulus rather than in terms of the number of analyses performed upon it.

The key theoretical assumptions made by Craik and Lockhart (1972) are as follows:

- 1 . The depth of processing of a stimulus has a substantial effect on its memorability.
- 2 . Deeper levels of analysis produce more elaborate, longer lasting, and stronger memory traces than do shallow levels of analyses.

Also, Eysenck (1979) argued that long-term memory is affected by distinctiveness of processing. Memory traces that are distinctive or unique will be more readily retrieved than memory traces that closely resemble others (Eysenck, 2001:322).

To make the learning effective for EFL learners, it is crucial for teachers to provide them not only with the group interaction for their experiences but also with an opportunity for a deep level of analysis regardless of whether it is explicit or implicit.

## VI. Proposal of Two-phased task — Core/peripheral task (Boku, 2004)

### A. Structure of core/peripheral task

It is widely accepted that task has three phases, that is, either pre-, during- and post-tasks, or pre-task, task cycle and language focus as Willis postulates. In both formulations, planning time can be seen either in the pre-task or during-task (or task cycle). In the three-phased task framework, a focused task leads to the collection of learners' discourse data.

On the other hand, a core/peripheral task (Boku, 2004) does not involve the pre-task. Instead, both core and peripheral tasks are a series of tasks; therefore, it is expected that they will be completed within a single class period. These tasks are meaning- rather than form-focused, although form is not necessarily ignored or neglected.

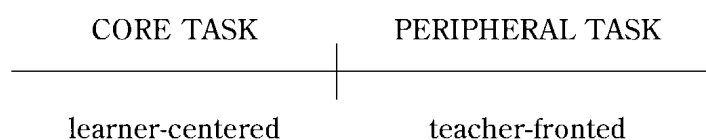


Figure 2

### B. The function of each component

#### 1. Core task

The rationale for creating two task phases is to make the task environment as authentic as possible. The conditions of the core task are as indicated below:

- a. Exposure to the real-world environment.
- b. No strategic planning; however, on-line planning may occur.
- c. Communication strategies should be used.

- d . Time pressure depending on the task.
- e . Report to the audience required.
- f . Constant change of partners and group members expected to reduce interdependence and to increase the zone of proximal development.
- g . Teacher stands back as a facilitator in the core task to create the learner-centered environment.
- h . Core task should be repeated briefly in the following lesson, C1 has the function of task rehearsal whereas C2 has the function of repetition (see 3 in *Figure 3*).
- i . Both knowledge construction task and language activation task are appropriate.

## **2. Peripheral task**

The conditions of peripheral task are as indicated below:

- a . Teacher is responsible for debriefing, consciousness-raising or strategy development (i.e., explaining objectives of task, feedback, and form/meaning focused instruction).
- b . Deepen learners' learning by calling their attention to the differences between their performance and expected outcome (see 1 in *Figure 3*).
- c . Debriefing accelerates working memory into short-term memory.
- d . Together with core task, peripheral task has the function of comprehensible input.
- e . Peripheral task will have the function of strategic planning for the upcoming repeated core task (see 2 in *Figure 3*).
- f . Analysis of needs for the next lesson if necessary.

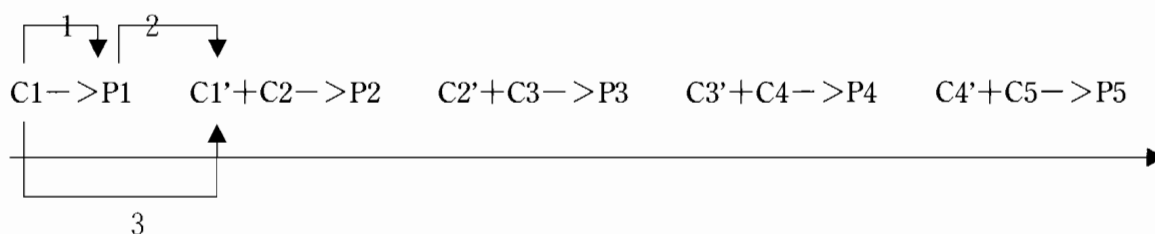


Figure 3(Core/peripheral task series)

\*(C: core task, P: peripheral task)

### C. Advantages of core/peripheral task

#### 1. Compatibility of learner, teacher and researcher

The core task is learner-centered while the peripheral task is conducted via teacher-fronted debriefing. Compared to the three-phased task, core/peripheral task appears to be closed to researchers in terms of data collection, however it is not. Although there is no focusing on form in strategic planning, research can be conducted through the core task which elicits forms.

#### 2. Flexible class length/materials

A core/peripheral task is suitable for any class that is between 45 and 90 minutes long. It is possible to adopt both teacher-made material and published textbooks.

#### 3. Authenticity-oriented

Without strategic planning, a more authentic environment can be created. Learners are pushed to use communication strategies for meaning.

#### 4. Applicability to any learner

Both memory-oriented and analytical learners can participate in and benefit from this framework because it accepts both learning styles.

### 5. Device to stop fossilization

Core task repetition in the following lesson, ‘Three Steps Forward and Two Steps Backward Method’ seems to proceed slowly; however, repetition helps turn short-term memory into long-term memory. Confidence enhances learners’ consciousness of form, which may help the vernacular style change to careful style. Furthermore, retrospective narrative writing with teacher instruction gives a good opportunity for learners to notice the gap between their output and expected outcome. This whole process is conducive to the internalization of learning.

## VII. Examples

### Language activating task--- ‘Die talk’

#### A. Core task:

1. Learners are asked to organize groups of four members.
2. A die will be provided for each group.
3. Teacher writes six topics on the board.
4. The teacher will ask learners in each group to take turns and use the die to decide which topic each will talk on for three minutes. The members of the group are encouraged to ask as many questions as they can. The learners both asking and answering questions are encouraged not to use dictionaries and not to worry about grammatical mistakes.
5. Each group member talks for three minutes. Some learners will be asked questions and others will not.
6. After twelve to thirteen minutes, all the learners in class change groups.

7. While they are changing the groups, the teacher changes the topics and writes six new topics on the board.
8. New group members will process the same die talk.
9. After everyone has had a chance to speak, the teacher may ask all the learners to stand up again and choose a partner with whom to discuss any of the twelve topics for three minutes. They change partners five times. Learners are asked to record the names of their partners and give the list to the teacher.
10. Learners are encouraged to report on one of the twelve topics they discussed and share what they learned during the talk with classmates.

**B. Peripheral task:**

1. The teacher will ask learners to write narratives about how they felt when they were in the first group, second group, and with partners. (*Optional: Using a worksheet is recommended*). (*See Appendix 2*)
2. After collecting the narratives, some of the learners' comments will be shared anonymously.
3. The teacher tells learners the objectives of this task.
4. The teacher gives implicit feedback (e.g., recast) or explicit grammatical instruction depending on the situation.
5. The teacher will give short theory instruction, for example, 'avoidance' or 'fossilization' as a strategy development.
6. (*Optional*) *The teacher asks learners to write a short comment on the instruction.*

The above core/peripheral task is a meaning-focused language activation task; however, the use of a particular form can be analyzed through learners' narrative writing. The constant change of the group members, partners and topic under the time pressure may show EFL learners what speaking and conversation are like outside of the classroom. In addition to chances for learners' output, teacher instruction is given as a debriefing at the end of the task. Also, learners may be relieved to learn that their grammatical mistakes are part of the natural learning mechanism, not a sign of low proficiency.

## VIII. Conclusion

In this paper, I have proposed a two-phased task framework, rejecting the necessity of strategic planning in order to solve the problems exhibited in the three-phased task. The issues focused on were: 1. redundancy, 2. learners' interdependence, 3. the role of the teacher, 4. the balance of focusing on form and meaning, and 5. applicability to the EFL classroom.

Since there is no time for planning in daily conversation, there is no reason to include it in the classroom from the authenticity perspective. What is important for learners' improvement is not being judged or evaluated every moment in class but being exposed to the dynamic interaction for their hypothesis testing. It may stimulate not only learners' linguistic awareness and their sense of communication strategies but also their individual conceptual development. By adapting a two-phased task, universal and culture-specific problems in class can be resolved without ignoring the original task objectives. Furthermore, it



will enable learners to take advantage of both authentic FL interaction and teacher instruction.

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APPENDIX 1 (Die talk: Sample topics)

- ・ Favorite movie/sports/music
- ・ The funniest experience I've ever had
- ・ If I were a millionaire....
- ・ Future dream
- ・ My childhood
- ・ How I spend my free time
- ・ The place I want to visit
- ・ If I were President of the U.S.A, I would
- ・ I agree/disagree with mothers working because
- ・ I agree/disagree with fathers taking child care holiday because
- ・ I feel happy when I.....
- ・ In ten years, I....

APPENDIX 2 (Die talk: Worksheet)

1. What made it hard for you to talk in the first group?
2. What was your assigned topic?
3. Did you ask any questions to your group members? Yes No (Why/not?)
4. Was it easier for you to talk to the members of the second group than to those of the first group? Yes No (Why/not?)
5. Do you think that difference of the topic influenced your ability to speak? Yes No (Why/not?)
6. Did you notice any grammatical mistakes when you were making your three-minute speeches?  
Yes (What kind of mistakes? )  
No
7. Did you use Reflexive pronouns or Subjunctive mood in your speech? Yes No
8. What kind of characteristics did you find in your group members' speeches? (pronunciation, grammar, eye contact, communication strategies and so on)
9. What did you find most important to discuss with your partner?
10. Did you talk more with your partner than you did with the group members?  
Yes  
No (Why/not?)