Implementing task-based learning with young learners

David Carless

This article draws on qualitative classroom observation data from case studies of three EFL classes in Hong Kong primary schools. It analyses four themes relevant to the classroom implementation of task-based learning with young learners, namely, noise/indiscipline, the use of the mother tongue, the extent of pupil involvement, and the role of drawing or colouring activities. For each of these issues, strategies for classroom practice are discussed. It is suggested that the paper carries implications for teachers carrying out activities or tasks with young EFL learners in other contexts.

Introduction

Task-based learning has become an orthodoxy in contemporary EFL teaching and in recent years has been exported to many countries around the globe. Much has been written about definitions of task and the role of tasks in second language acquisition (e.g. Ellis 2000; Skehan 1996), as well as the different stages in task-based lessons (Willis 1996), and task types (e.g. Skehan and Foster 1997). However, there is little practical discussion of how tasks are actually implemented in school settings, particularly where conditions may be less than ideal, in terms of one or more of the following conditions:

- large class sizes
- cramped classrooms
- lack of appropriate resources
- teachers not trained in task-based methodologies
- teachers with limited language proficiency
- traditional examination-based syllabi.

This article is based on detailed qualitative case studies (Carless 2001) of three teachers in different schools (referred to as teachers A, B, and C) implementing a task-based innovation in Hong Kong primary schools, with pupils aged six–seven years old. Over a period of one academic year, 15 lessons for each teacher were observed and audio-taped, making a total of 51 lessons in total. Six semi-structured interviews per teacher were carried out, transcribed, and analysed. As such, the paper draws on a comprehensive study of classroom experiences. The case study evidence was also cross-validated against other classroom observations of around 250 primary EFL lessons during nine years' experience as a teacher educator in Hong Kong.

Before proceeding with this discussion, a few brief observations on the Hong Kong primary school context for task-based learning will be helpful. Task-based teaching has not yet fully established itself and is generally considered—except by younger or more recently trained teachers—to be innovative. Conditions for task-based learning are not particularly favourable. Average class sizes in primary schools are around 36 pupils per class, and classrooms are usually cramped, spartan, and with inadequate storage space. Just as principals and senior teachers may neither fully understand nor support the rationale for task-based learning, traditional pencil and paper tests are not aligned with methods which tend to place more emphasis on speaking, listening, and the communication of meaning.

Four themes will be discussed: noise and indiscipline; use of the mother tongue; pupil involvement in tasks; and the role of drawing and colouring in task-based learning. Although I cover the issues separately for convenience of exposition, I do not wish to imply that there is no overlap between the different themes. Use of the mother tongue, for example, sometimes results in increased noise levels. For each of these themes, I identify challenges for the implementation of task-based learning with reference to the three case study classrooms, and then make suggestions relevant to classroom practice.

Noise and indiscipline

The three teachers all noted certain tensions between carrying out tasks or activities, and maintaining good discipline. This is a particular issue in the Hong Kong context, where some school principals and senior colleagues seem to expect classrooms to be quiet and orderly, with pupils focused on the diligent execution of reading or writing exercises, and most speaking restricted to the teacher, or to choral repetition by pupils.

Teacher A, who trained as an English teacher, and has eight years of teaching experience, was very successful at involving pupils actively in lessons, but found it difficult to retain appropriate discipline, as evidenced by frequent interruptions, where she had to halt the lesson in order to remind students about their behaviour. She believes strongly in motivating pupils to put language into use, and in order to achieve this seems willing to tolerate some laxity in noise and discipline standards. She indicates that she is more tolerant of noise than some of her peers, explaining that 'Sometimes, it is unavoidable to have noise when they are playing games, or when they are talking, and children walk around. Some teachers and some head teachers may not accept that.'

Teacher B, had two years of teaching experience, and was in the process of carrying out an in-service programme of initial teacher training. She experienced similar tensions to Teacher A, albeit from a contrasting perspective. In other words, whilst Teacher A emphasizes communicative tasks rather than discipline, Teacher B tends to stress good behaviour, whilst allowing less opportunity for activities. She expresses her approach as follows: 'I insist on a well-organized and well-disciplined class' and 'sometimes doing the pair-work is quite difficult because of the discipline ... they [the pupils] just use the opportunity to talk'. This tends to have the result that Teacher B's class is better behaved

David Carless

than Teacher A's class, but spends less time carrying out tasks. There seems to be a tension between the value of carrying out activities and the desire to maintain a reasonably quiet environment, with a sound disciplinary foundation.

Teacher C, who was trained as an English teacher, and has five years of teaching experience, seems to be able to maintain good pupil behaviour whilst also involving pupils in task-based activities. As such, she is able to integrate quite successfully, some of the positive attributes of Teacher A, in terms of motivation, and in terms of Teacher B's well-organized classroom management. She highlights teacher ability to tolerate noise as being important, and specifically identifies this as an area where she believes she has developed as a teacher:

> [I am improving in that...] I got them to talk more in class and I can bear all kinds of noise that they made. Of course, before that or even now, I always think that you shouldn't make so much noise. Even if you talk you should talk softer, but I think I can bear it now, much more than before.

This greater tolerance of noise does, however, raise the issue of how far the noise is constructive.

Overall, the classrooms of the three teachers indicate some tension between discipline, on the one hand, and the noise generated by certain oral or group tasks. Teachers found it difficult to achieve a balance between carrying out communicative tasks and maintaining good behaviour. Large class sizes tend to accentuate problems of noise and indiscipline, as do classes where there are wide discrepancies in ability, as was the case for Teacher A's class. In this case, too, the quicker students may be able to finish an activity rapidly, and so have greater opportunity to move off-task.

In the classrooms under review, noise or indiscipline seemed to occur in response to three sets of circumstances. Firstly, when students were not clear what to do, animated discussions or arguments broke out, and the teacher was often deluged with queries. Secondly, the task was too easy or too difficult, so students become 'off-task', due to finishing too quickly, not knowing what to do, or becoming frustrated by the difficulty. Thirdly, the characteristics of the task itself may provoke excessive noise. For example, certain types of role-play may breed over-excitement, as when Teacher A was doing the topic of noises, and students were invited to make sounds of aeroplanes or birds. In such a case, noise is obligatory, and the teacher is mainly concerned with ensuring that it remains within reasonable levels.

What strategies can teachers adopt, or teacher educators recommend, to minimize noise/indiscipline during pair or group activities? The rationale for pair-work, group work, or activities, needs to be indicated clearly to students, particularly in contexts where this may not be a universal teacher strategy. Pupils who are accustomed to teacher-fronted lessons need to know why they are being asked to do something differently, and reassured that the teacher is not simply 'taking a break', since there is a clear purpose to whatever activity is being attempted.

Task-based learning with young learners

Following from this, the teacher's expectations of pupil role and performance during the activity need to be communicated clearly, so that the students are aware of what is expected of them. Reminders about noise levels need to be made before an activity commences, as well as during its process. Some teachers appoint group leaders to be responsible for the supervision of noise amongst their peers, whilst others offer rewards to the quietest or best-behaved groups of children. These strategies appear to be useful aspects of the repertoire of the task-based teacher.

Use of the mother tongue

The second theme I wish to address is the use of the mother tongue by pupils during tasks. Use of the first language or code-switching from the target language to the mother tongue or vice versa is a common feature in EFL world-wide, and is a natural act which, if used judiciously by teachers or pupils, seems to make a positive contribution to the learning process. In a study in Turkish secondary schools, Eldridge (1996) found that most code-switching was purposeful, and related to pedagogical goals, and that higher and lower achievers exhibited a similar quantity of code-switching. The mother tongue seems to serve a number of functions, such as: an opportunity for pupils to clarify the meaning of what the teacher has said; discussion of the requirements of a task, and how it might be tackled; and a social function, in terms of creating a sense of group cohesion, or reducing student anxiety. A different perspective is offered by a study of Hong Kong teachers on an in-service course which was carrying out a short period of experimental task-based teaching in their own schools (Carless and Gordon 1997). These teacher respondents identified pupil use of Cantonese as the most prominent difficulty they experienced, expressing their frustration at the widespread use of the L1 during task-based learning, indicating that as the rationale for pair/group work was for pupils to put English language into use, pupil communication in the mother tongue was in conflict with these goals.

In each of the classes given by the three teachers, it could be observed that pupils frequently used Cantonese rather than English during tasks. These Cantonese interactions seemed to involve discussions that were relevant to the task—in itself, a useful aspect of the learning process—as well as irrelevant ones. While this was a normal social function, it was unlikely to promote English language learning (which was especially prominent in Teacher A's lessons). Similarly, Swain and Lapkin (2000) found that, in their study, pupils used the first language for three main purposes: moving the task along, focusing attention, and interpersonal interaction. In the current study, the extent of use made of the mother tongue appeared to relate to the following two dimensions. Firstly, the more linguistically complex and open-ended the task, the more use seemed to be made of the mother tongue. For example, in one of Teacher B's lessons, the group discussion of some authentic photographs taken by the teacher seemed to generate greater use of Cantonese than, for example, a guided pair-work task in another lesson. Secondly, there was some evidence to indicate that pupils' language proficiency impacted on the extent of mother tongue use, so that in some cases, the higher the

David Carless

language proficiency of pupils, the less Cantonese they used. However, there was also contrary evidence which indicated that, for example, in Teacher A's class (the one of highest ability) there were times when a lot of Cantonese was used—particularly when the students became over-excited, or distracted. Within both of these two dimensions, it was also observable that there was a variation in the use of the mother tongue/target language between groups of pupils, as well as between classes. In other words, even in a less linguistically-complex task, and irrespective of their language proficiency, some pairs of pupils predominantly used Cantonese.

How can teachers (or teacher educators) promote the use of the target language during tasks? Firstly, teachers can be good language models themselves, by using the target language as far as possible when interacting with their classes. For the current study, Teachers A and C were generally successful in creating an 'English atmosphere' in their classes. Teacher B, on the other hand, tended to switch frequently from English to Cantonese and back. When pupils are accustomed to hearing the teacher frequently code-switching, they may also become less inclined to persevere with target language interaction. Secondly, while pupils obviously need to be taught the language they need to complete a task, they also need to know the language of interaction or negotiation of meaning, such as 'Can you repeat?', 'You start', 'Are you ready?', 'What do you mean?', etc. From the classroom observation for this study, there was little evidence that these kinds of phrases were being taught, or were known to the pupils. Thirdly, teachers should state the expectations for language use at the outset of the activity, since some tasks will permit more or less use of the mother tongue. Teachers also need to monitor the use of Cantonese during tasks, and to devise appropriate 'carrots and sticks' to motivate pupils to use English. Fourthly, teachers need to tolerate a certain amount of natural mother tongue dialogue, as long as it is accompanied by attempts at producing additional English language output. As a rough rule of thumb, I suggest that if there is a greater quantity of total utterances in the target language than in the mother tongue, the task has probably been reasonably successful, but once the amount of first language speech starts to exceed the use of English, this becomes a cause for concern.

Pupil involvement   The third theme arising from the classroom observation for the study is that there is sometimes a high degree of variety of pupil involvement in group work for task-based learning, whereby some pupils may have roles which require them to speak quite a lot, whilst others have more limited roles. If one assumes that one of the aims of task-based learning is for pupils to produce English language to undertake a given task, the extent of pupil use of English is a factor in the implementation of task-based learning. Or, to put it another way, is it problematic if a task is completed without some of the pupils making much use of English? Similarly, in his critique of task-based interaction, Seedhouse (1999) points out that students often focus principally on task completion, and that as a result, they sometimes produce only the most minimal display of linguistic output necessary to complete the task.

Task-based learning with young learners   393

Classroom data for the study provided a number of illustrations where, during task-based learning, English language production was mainly restricted to certain individuals. For example, in one task which revolved around the structures, 'What can you see?, 'I can see a ...', contextualized by looking out of the classroom window, the group leaders of small groups of five or six people were active in language production, and explaining what they could see. However, there was a limited role for other group members, who were restricted to repeating the question 'What can you see?' and in practice some of them did not even contribute this utterance. A further example arose in one of Teacher B's lessons, when, as she observed with reference to a water colours activity, 'it is difficult for everyone to participate in the activity, since the activity is basically done by one or two students of the group'. The extent of pupil involvement in such tasks raises the issue of the extent to which task-based learning is taking place successfully. On the other hand, it may be that the pupils are learning something from observing others carrying out the task, and have not yet reached the stage of second language development where they feel comfortable in speaking up.

How can teachers maximize the involvement of pupils during group work? The following are tentative suggestions which need further exploration through classroom practice or research. Firstly, teachers might develop more inclusivity in the classroom, whereby all students, and not just the more able ones, are encouraged and supported to make oral contributions during lessons. If all of the pupils are able to develop the confidence to speak in whole-class activities, it is hoped that this will carry over to group work. For this reason, whilst observing group work, teachers may like to monitor pupil contributions, with the aim of gently discouraging the more domineering students, and encouraging the more reticent ones. Secondly, if groups have a leader, as in the classes for this study, it may be desirable for this role to circulate amongst the pupils, rather than be restricted to one student for an extended period. Thirdly, there could be flexibility in timing and grouping, with alternative roles being assigned to students at different times, and groups being rearranged in different ways, to provide more opportunities for pupils to enact different roles.

Drawing and colouring

The fourth theme concerns the phenomena of drawing, colouring, or other tasks which involve limited target-language production. This issue shares some common ground with the previous one, in that it focuses on a lack of pupil linguistic output. A certain amount of drawing/colouring is usually accepted as good primary practice. For example pupils may be encouraged to draw a picture, and to write a caption or short text related to the picture. An illustration from a double lesson in Teacher C's lessons involved the structure, 'What can you see?' as discussed above. Pupils carried out a task whereby they drew what they could see from the classroom window, and then produced a short text beginning 'From my classroom window, I can see ....'. In this case, the pupils spent 15–25 minutes on drawing and colouring before focusing on producing some English text to go with their drawings. This would seem to be an acceptable balance between the relaxation or enjoyment provided by the

David Carless

drawing/colouring, and the language output, although some critics might prefer more emphasis on the linguistic than the artistic elements. However, there were some occasions during the observed lessons in which some pupils seemed to produce drawing/colouring but used no (or virtually no) English language, either orally or in writing. It is a moot point whether the motivating aspects of drawing and colouring compensate for the lack of language learning that sometimes seems to take place, particularly within Hong Kong culture, where 'serious learning' seems to be more valued than enjoyable learning (Cheng and Wong 1996). Teacher C reflects as follows: 'Sometimes I find that they enjoy doing those activities but how much did they really learn, I just wonder'.

Another example was taken from one of Teacher A's lessons, when the pupils were asked to make a zoo by using 'cut-outs' of animals and pasting them onto coloured paper. This seemed to generate a lot of conversation in the mother tongue, but while it involved pupils actively and quite enthusiastically in a task, there was almost no target language output. The teacher expressed some reservations about the time-consuming nature of the activity although she did feel that there were some additional non-linguistic gains from the activity, e.g. the conceptualization of which animals are cognate, and the social skill of co-operation during group work. In such a case, students may be learning elements which go beyond the English language.

Further consideration of language output may need to be given to time-consuming drawing/colouring activities, or to other tasks which involve modelling or making things. One practical suggestion is that, whenever possible, teachers should develop the habit for pupils of doing the written part of the exercise or task at the beginning or midway through the activity, with the drawing or colouring to be completed afterwards. This might help to mitigate the problem which occurs when pupils spend a lot of time on 'non-linguistic elements'.

Conclusion

This article has discussed implementation issues in task-based learning with young learners—an aspect that has not been covered in detail in the existing literature on tasks. It has used classroom observation and interview data to provide an analysis of four issues facing teachers in the Hong Kong context. It is suggested that the discussion has relevance to other EFL contexts, and in particular, those which share some of the constraints referred to in the opening paragraph. To conclude, I would like to suggest that a further avenue for investigation is the young learner perspective on task-based learning. What are the pupils' interpretations of the rationale for doing tasks? What similarities and differences exist between teachers' and pupils' views of task-based learning? What are the pupils' perceptions of the implementation issues discussed in this paper?

Final version received May 2001

References

Carless, D. 2001. 'Curriculum innovation in the primary ELT classroom: Case studies of three teachers implementing Hong Kong's Target-Oriented Curriculum (TOC)'. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Warwick.

Carless, D. and **A. Gordon.** 1997. 'Primary English teachers' attitudes towards the implementation of task-based teaching'. *Journal of Primary Education* 7/1: 139–59.

Cheng, K. M. and **K. C. Wong.** 1996. 'School effectiveness in East Asia: Concepts, origins and implications'. *Journal of Educational Administration* 34/5: 32–49.

Eldridge, J. 1996. 'Code-switching in a Turkish secondary school'. *ELT Journal* 50/4: 303–11.

Ellis, R. 2000. 'Task-based research and language pedagogy'. *Language Teaching Research* 4/3: 193–200.

Seedhouse, P. 1999. 'Task-based interaction'. *ELT Journal* 53/3: 149–56.

Skehan, P. 1996. 'Second language acquisition research and task-based instruction' in J. Willis and D.Willis (eds.). *Challenge and Change in Language Teaching.* Oxford: Heinemann.

Skehan, P. and **P. Foster.** 1997. 'Task type and task processing conditions as influences on foreign language performance'. *Language Teaching Research* 1/3: 185–211.

Swain, M. and **S. Lapkin.** 2000. 'Task-based second language learning: The uses of the first language'. *Language Teaching Research* 4/3: 251–74.

Willis, J. 1996. *A Framework for Task-based learning.* Harlow: Longman.

The author

David Carless is a Senior Lecturer in the English Department of the Hong Kong Institute of Education. He has worked as a teacher and teacher educator in England, France, and Hong Kong. He holds an MA in Applied Linguistics from the University of Birmingham and a PhD from the University of Warwick. His main research interests are in classroom-based research, the management of change, and the implementation of innovations.
Email: dcarless@ied.edu.hk