TIPS FOR TEACHERS

Asking Our Own Questions: A Task-based Survey and Presentation Project

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Introduction

One issue with English education in many environments is that it can often seem anchored to a teacher or to a textbook (Dashwood, 2005) that lacks pragmatic authenticity. To address this concern, some teachers utilize task-based activities such as writing and delivering a speech or creating role play presentations because they provide "students with an opportunity to function in an autonomous context, further developing their confidence and empowering them to use English in a fulfilling and rewarding way" (Bury et al, 2012, p. 17). However, many task-based activities consist solely of a set of interview or survey questions prepared by teachers and based on their choice of topic. While students may be required to write one or two additional questions of their own, this is generally insufficient to generate a sense of ownership of the task among the students.

Furthermore, concerns about time, rigid curricula, and students' ability to create their own surveys means that teachers often avoid task-based activities. This is unfortunate because well-designed task-based activities offer students the chance to employ the target language in a communicative manner to achieve an outcome in an authentic context (Alan and Stroller, 2005). Consequently, we introduced a task-based survey and presentation project to eleventh grade students in a private Japanese high school. The students created their own surveys on a topic of their choice, conducted the surveys through communicative data gathering, analyzed their results, wrote reports, and then delivered presentations. During the presentations, each student was assessed by both the teachers and their peers via constructive written feedback and numerical ratings. Both the instructors and students were pleasantly surprised by the positive outcomes of the project.

Procedure

The project was broken down into three stages: survey, analysis and preparation, presentation. Two lessons were allocated to each stage, for a total of six 50-minute lessons. Throughout the process, students were encouraged to work autonomously, with the teacher playing the role of facilitator or monitor so as not to limit creativity or impose too much control over the project development. A suggested plan for replicating the project follows.

Lesson One

1. [Five minutes] Inform students that they will be creating and conducting surveys and presenting their results to their peers. Then, form groups of two to three students.
2. [Five minutes] Have each group choose a survey topic. Act as a facilitator by asking questions such as these: *What do you like to do? What are you interested in? What is a big current news story and what do you think about it? What would you like to find out from other students?*
3. [Five minutes] Assist groups in narrowing their survey topic if necessary. For example, the general topic of fashion could focus on clothes shopping or on fashion brand awareness. Again, teachers act as facilitators, assisting students to consider different areas of focus within their chosen topic.
4. [Twenty-five minutes] Tell groups to draft roughly ten survey questions. Since they will be surveying their peers, structured or scaled questions are desirable. Provide examples if needed.
5. [Ten minutes] Have each group consider the best order for their questions, providing feedback as necessary.

One common issue with lessons like this is how to balance the use of L1 with a desire for use of L2 during negotiations and discussions (Carless, 2008). While L1 use may seem undesirable from a communicative perspective, it is important to remember that the goal of the project is the production of a survey in English and its subsequent presentation. Thus, negotiation in the students' L1 during brainstorming stages can ultimately contribute to L2 acquisition and development.

Lesson Two

1. [Thirty minutes] Have each group survey the others, with a target of interviewing at least ten students. If more than one class is taking part, then

the different classes should survey each other. Teachers monitor and assist as needed.

2. [Twenty minutes] Have groups begin collating and analyzing their results.

Lesson Three

[Fifty minutes] Have groups prepare the first draft of their survey reports. Provide content guidelines such as these questions:

- What was your topic?
- Why did you choose it?
- What questions did you ask?
- Who did you ask?
- How many people did you ask?
- What were your results?
- What do your results mean?

Point out that, unlike a speech, when a single student delivers a monologue, the aim here is for them to prepare group presentations. Encourage students to consider both how they can use graphs, tables, and other non-textual information to support their spoken comments and how they should organize their presentation so that each group member plays an active and balanced role. At the end of the lesson, collect the draft presentations so you can provide feedback before the next lesson. Alternatively, conduct a live feedback session with each group during the first part of the next lesson.

Lesson Four

1. [Fifteen minutes] Give each group feedback on their draft presentations and time to make necessary revisions.
2. [Thirty-five minutes] Provide time for groups to practice their presentations. Monitor and assist as needed ensuring that every member takes an active role.

Lessons Five and Six

1. Give everyone scoring sheets (see sample in the appendix) and encourage them to develop their critical thinking skills by making comments about

the group presentations and their findings. Be sure to stress the importance of providing constructive comments.

2. Have each group present their survey results to their peers. If more than one class is involved, students should present to the class that they surveyed.

Assuming each presentation takes roughly five minutes, six or seven presentations can be given during a 50-minute lesson, with sufficient time to open and close the lesson and transition between groups. Presentation length can be increased or decreased as needed based on the number of lessons the teacher can allocate to the project, lesson length, class size, and the proficiency level of the students.

Feedback from our students indicated that they overwhelmingly (over 90%) believed this project was a good way to improve their English and had a positive effect on their confidence and level of English speaking and writing skill. They also reported enjoying making and conducting both the survey and the presentation. This finding was supported by comments made by the students, including, but not limited to these: *It was fun. It was good to hear other opinions. We learned new things*. Many students commented that they *had learned about other students*, showing that an authentic learning context had been created.

Addressing the Issue of Time

It is likely that many teachers would be interested in trying this kind of student survey activity but would find it impossible to devote a full six lessons to it. While the simplest way to present the course is over a series of consecutive lessons, this is not always practical, and subsequent iterations of the project have been included in more time-constrained syllabi. The alternative plan outlined here requires the dedication of only two full lessons:

Lesson 1   Introduce the project and have groups draft their surveys.

Survey   Have student groups conduct their surveys during suitable times such as homeroom, recess, lunch, or during after-school activities.

Homework   Assign student to analyze the results.

Lesson 2   Have student groups begin to draft their presentations.

Homework   Have student groups complete their draft presentations.

Lessons 3-6   Have one or two student groups make their presentations at the beginning of subsequent lessons.

Other alternatives for conducting student surveys include during a special school event such as a culture festival, summer camp, or open house day. Finally, the whole project could be included as part of a study trip syllabus.

Conclusion

The survey and presentation project described here provides students with the opportunity to reinforce communicative skills, develop autonomy, reinforce critical thinking skills (especially while writing the surveys and presenting their results), review and revise vocabulary and grammatical points, self-evaluate their work, and engage in peer assessment. We hope that this outline provides enough information to help other teachers to develop and implement similar task-based projects with their own English language classes.

References

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About the Authors

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Appendix

Peer Marking Sheet

The following is an example peer marking sheet for a single up to four students.

Topic:					
Names:			Names:		
A:			C:		
B:			D:		
	A	B		C	D
Content Score:	/5	/5	Content Score:	/5	/5
Pronunciation Score:	/5	/5	Pronunciation Score:	/5	/5
Delivery Score:	/15	/15	Delivery Score:	/15	/15
Total Score:	/25	/25	Total Score:	/25	/25
Comments:					

TIPS FOR TEACHERS

From Reading Comprehension Dilemma to Classroom Library

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Background

I have taught English at senior high schools in Japan for about 10 years. Sometimes my school has native English speaking assistant language teachers (ALTs). One day, an ALT brought several stories to class, stories that had blanks in them. Students worked in pairs; one asked the other to think of words to put into the blanks. Eventually, they made very funny stories. They enjoyed the activity, but some students could not understand the stories that they had created. I wanted them to understand the stories because they were very funny. At first, I asked students to translate their stories into Japanese, a common way to assess reading comprehension in EFL classes. However, this proved more difficult than I expected. Next, since they like to draw, I asked them to draw pictures based on very careful reading of the words in their stories using a simple mini book format. This was much more successful. What began as a frustration level reading activity became fun in the end. Students used all four language skills, created and appreciated humor in English, and demonstrated reading comprehension by doing something they love—drawing.

Procedure

1. Prepare a short story based on a reading passage from your textbook or another familiar source. It should be just a few sentences and at a level that will be easily readable for your students.

2. Replace several content words in the story with blanks, about one per sentence at first.

3. Below each blank, write the part of speech or another clue for the deleted word, for example *noun, verb, adjective, number, or person's name.* (See Appendix A)

4. If necessary, briefly review the parts of speech that students will need to understand the missing word clues.

5. Ask for a student volunteer to demonstrate the pair work with you.

6. Hide your story behind a book or folder so that your student partner cannot see it.

7. Demonstrate how to elicit words from your partner by, for example, saying: "Number 1, adjective."

8. When your partner answers, write the word in the blank.

9. Continue for 2-3 more words until students have the idea.

10. End the demonstration and form pairs.

11. Let each pair decide who will elicit the words and who will supply them.

12. Give each pair one copy of the story and time to work.

13. When they finish filling in the blanks, have them read their stories together. Nearly always, they will be very funny.

14. Have them make a picture book based on their story. (See Appendix B)

15. When all the picture books are completed (probably in a later class), give students time to exchange and read their classmates' stories.

Variations, Extensions, and Caveats

- You can complete these steps over several lessons and/or homework assignments.

- If you can prepare two stories, then students can take turns eliciting and supplying the missing words.

- Stories can be created or adapted from a variety of texts to fit the various proficiency levels of your students.

- Of course, the gap-filling story can be a stand-alone activity. However, making and sharing the picture books creates additional opportunities for students to read and reread the same story frame with humorous variations. Each reading reinforces the target sentences patterns and builds fluency and confidence in beginning readers.

- If you repeat this activity periodically, you will create a classroom library of mini books.

- There are many ways to make a mini book. I have large classes and a tight budget, so I used just one sheet of paper for each student and the technique illustrated in this *YouTube* video https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=21qi9ZcQV. (See Appendix C)

Acknowledgement

This gap-filling activity is modeled on a popular party game called *Mad Libs* which was invented in the United States in the 1950s. *Mad Libs* is a playful variation of *ad lib*. There are many inexpensive thematically-related collections of *Mad Libs* designed for youth, general, and adult audiences available at http://www.madlibs.com/ or from general book vendors. You may be able to use original *Mad Libs* with your students, but I find it easier to make my own stories since the authentic stories contain colloquial expressions and cultural references that my students do not understand.

About the Author

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Appendix A

Example of story with gaps
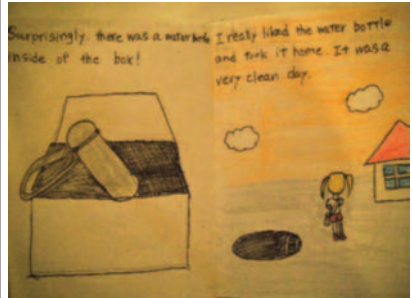
Example: A Very _____ Day
(adjective)

1.   There is a/an _____ park near my house.
(adjective)

2.   I really like the park because it has many _____.
(plural noun)

3.   I often go to the park and I enjoy _____ there.
(verb ending in –*ing*)

4.   One day, I found a box on a/an _____ in the park.
(noun)

5.   The box was very _____, so I opened it.
(adjective)

6.   Surprisingly, there was a/an _____ inside of the box!
(noun)

7.   I really liked the _____ and took it home.
(same noun)

8.   It was a very _____ day.
(same adjective as in the title)

Appendix B

Example of completed story and picture book

The underlined words below correspond to the gaps in the original story shown in Appendix A.

A Very Clean Day

There is a deep park near my house. I really like the park because it has many seashells. I often go to the park and I enjoy sleeping there.	
One day, I found a box on a bird in the park. The box was very white, so I opened it.	
Surprisingly, there was a water bottle inside of the box. I really liked the water bottle and took it home. It was a very clean day.	

Appendix C

Mini book before folding

This image shows the completed 8-page mini book before it was folded.