

A task design for language classes.

Peter Reemst

The following is a description of a classroom task designed for groups. The task is a speaking task utilising pictures. Its main intention is to provide practice in the macro skill of speaking and therefore falls into the category of a communicative approach. The task is also intended to make students aware of errors in the use of verb tenses. I have found pictures to be a very good and simple way of getting learners to speak, since an interesting picture has the power to engage students (Harmer, 1998). In outlining the classroom task, I shall provide the following information: the aim and rationale; a profile of the learners; the resources/materials needed; the procedures involved in presenting the task; and a way of evaluating the task. While the task design, procedures and variations of the task are the product of my own independent thinking, I would like to acknowledge that the original idea for this task was suggested to me after perusing a copy of *Take Your Pick* by Lyn Woolcott (1992).

PART ONE

Aim and rationale

This is a speaking task. The aim of the lesson is to give Japanese university students of English practice in the use of the present tense in English (the present simple and present continuous). Although they have

already learned these in school, clarification and consolidation is needed as both my colleagues and myself have often noticed that our students continue to confuse the two when they are at university. Since the task revolves around pictures there will be two aims: a free speaking skills aim - wherein they will respond naturally to the pictures and talk about them; and a language aim - wherein students will consider and contrast the use of the present simple and present continuous tenses. Also, as part of the language aim there will be activation and building of students' vocabulary - based on words that they discover are necessary to complete the task adequately. There is also a sub-aim, and that will be to familiarise students with the concept of speaking about pictures since in recent years these have been increasingly integrated into tests, such as the Cambridge English test.

The rationale behind the task can be explained by personal observations that the target students, despite having learned the tenses, and despite being able to passively recognise them, in reality, often lack sufficient skill in using them. I believe this is partly a result of the way that present tenses are taught in Japanese middle schools. For example, many students believe that the difference between the present simple and present continuous can be demonstrated by juxtaposing the *masu and te-imasu* forms in Japanese:

Kohi o nomimasu I drink coffee

Kohi o nondeimasu I am drinking coffee

Therefore, the present continuous in English is deduced to be the equivalent of the *te-imasu* form. This is not a particularly useful way of teaching the difference between the present simple and present continuous

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in English since, unlike English, both *masu* and *te-imasu* can be used to denote something that one does habitually. Therefore, in the second example above, *kohi o nondeimasu* can also be translated as 'I drink coffee'. This can quite naturally lead to confusion with the result that some students mistakenly believe that the present continuous in English is also used to denote habitual actions. Conversely, some assume that the present simple in English can be used to describe action going on in the present. Even more confusingly, *themasu* form can also be used to denote actions to be performed with reference to the near future: *Konban wa kohi o nomimasu* means 'I am drinking coffee this evening'. Therefore, it seems important to provide this grammatical consciousness-raising (Rutherford, 1987) in an effort to ameliorate the target students' confidence and proficiency in the use of the present tense in English.

There is thus a causal relationship between the speaking task and the building of new vocabulary. Often students are able to think of what they want to say, but the apt vocabulary does not come immediately to mind. In these situations, students are compelled to think of words to match their thoughts. Thus they are 'challenged cognitively as well as linguistically' (Nunan, 1991: 210). In addition, it should also be noted that most of the learners in this group receive few opportunities to practise speaking outside of our meetings together. The communicative function of the speaking task, therefore, seems well motivated (Richards, 1985).

Profile of learners

There are 24 learners in the group. Their level is pre-intermediate. They have been my learners now since the middle of September 1999. In the first semester they took a similar class with another native speaker (we

exchanged classes halfway through the academic year). They are all of Japanese nationality and in their first year of university. There are eighteen female and six male students. Most of the students are English majors with the exception of six students who are Russian majors. They are all approximately 19 years of age. They all took English as a required subject in school (three years of Middle School and three of High School). Their motivation levels are quite different. In brief, we could say that the motivation level of the female students is on the whole noticeably higher than that of the male students. About a third of the students seem to regard English as very important for their future plans, several expressing the wish to gain employment in the future in a career where they can utilise their English skills. Many of them would like to visit an English speaking country in the future; five students have expressed a desire to continue their studies in an English speaking country. At least three students appear to have no real purpose in learning English, or even interest in learning it, despite the fact that it is their major. In general, though, the group is cooperative and cheerful and has so far worked quite well together. The students also take a listening class, which meets once a week with a native speaker. Japanese speaking English teachers are responsible for their other lessons and these are mostly based around semantics, prose composition, reading and English in translation (the Russian students do not take part in these lessons). As noted above under aim and rationale, the majority of the students have few chances to practice speaking English, especially from a communicative standpoint.

Resources

About two or three dozen pictures for the learners to choose from are required. These can be from magazines or collections of photographs, etc.

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In consideration of their level (pre-intermediate), the pictures should not be of an esoteric, abstract or overly bizarre nature, given too that the aim is to get them to describe them using the present continuous. Over-crowded images could also be a distraction. Pictures of people doing everyday and mundane things are considered ideal (Woolcott, 1992). This would be likely to facilitate language similar to, for example, 'he is drinking coffee'.

Procedures

The lesson is built around three stages:

Stage1: Task Focus.

Students will be put in groups of three. They will be told that they are going to look at some pictures and talk about them in turns. One student from the group will then be told to select their favourite picture from a pile of photos. They will be given a chance to study it for a few minutes before proceeding to describe it to the other members of the group. While they will be encouraged to provide as much detail as possible, they will be specifically directed to talk about the photo from the point of view of the present ('now'). The teacher will go around the class paying close attention to the tenses and vocabulary being used, making notes as required.

Stage 2: Language Focus.

This will be based on teacher observations made during stage1. Specifically the teacher will direct questions to some of the students. Those students will be asked to describe the picture to the whole class. If expected errors in the use of present tenses occur, the teacher will attempt to make students aware of these (grammar consciousness raising) by engaging in question and answer with the students. In other words, the teacher will provide cues. For example, if a student were to declare that a man in

a picture 'wears' a sports jacket, the teacher might ask that student whether the man always 'wears' a sports jacket. For the purposes of illustration here is a dialogue which took place in my class.

T: Does he wear a sports jacket on the weekend?

S: Yes, he does.

T: Does he wear it to weddings?

S: No, he doesn't.

T: Does he like wearing his sports jacket?

S: Yes, he does.

T: Is he wearing it now?

S: Yes, he is.

T: Ah, wearing. He is wearing his sports jacket now.

This is an example of how the learners were able to 'induce rules from their experience of using the language'(Richards, Platt & Weber, 1985, cited in Nunan, 1991: 156)

A similar procedure could be followed with one or two other students. Finally, if it is thought useful, the teacher can have the option of establishing a rule: the present simple is used to describe habitual action while the present continuous is used to describe what is happening now. The important point here is that correction has followed on from error: 'Correction must bring student's attention to their own errors', and 'in meaningful, communicative contexts'(Pica, 1994: 70).

Stage 3: Repetition and consolidation of task in stage 1.

Following elicitation of the main points in Stage 2, the students will

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then be asked to repeat the task, this time with a different student from each group being asked to select a picture and to describe it to the rest of the group. By now, the students should be more mindful of the correct use of the present continuous and fewer or no errors in the use of it are anticipated. Finally, the last student in each group will describe their favourite picture, providing more opportunity for consolidation of the task aims.

Evaluation

The students will engage in self-evaluation. In the final 5 minutes of class time, they will be instructed to write their impressions and a description of the lesson in their diaries. This will thus provide the teacher with useful student feedback on the task and may suggest possibilities for modifying and developing the task.

Secondly, the teacher can incorporate the task in the monthly test - the test will include a picture and the students will be asked to describe it from the point of view of what is happening now.

PART TWO

In this section I will attempt to outline how the above task can be modified in a number of ways in order to make it both more and less challenging, showing how it might be adjusted for particular learners and particular proficiency levels.

First variety of task -- for Japanese adult learners of elementary level

In Japan, it is quite common for adult learners to take up the study

of English as a kind of hobby - after work, or in retirement, as an escape from the duties of running a household, etc. Such learners are typically middle-aged, and female. Although proficiency levels sometimes differ, the typical standard is quite elementary with many of them rarely having seriously studied English in their lives. It is for such low-level learners that the following variation of the task is intended.

The **aim** and **rationale** here is similar to that of the original task. This is because it has been noticed that this category of learners also has a tendency to confuse the use of the present simple with the present continuous.

As for **procedure**, students are arranged in groups as outlined in Part One. The same or similar set of pictures is placed in a pile at the front of the class. Students are asked to select one in turns and talk about it in the manner outlined in the original variation above. This time however, the teacher will direct, not only the speaker, but also the *other members* of each group, to study and think about the picture selected by the speaker for a few minutes. They will be asked to think of questions that will elicit information from the speaker (they may write their questions down if they wish). The learners will be specifically directed by the teacher to ask -ING questions. They will be instructed to ask the speaker what the person in the picture selected *is doing*. In addition, they will be instructed to prompt the speaker in a more obvious way, if they feel that information is not forthcoming. For example, they might ask, '*What is the man drinking?*' to elicit a reply similar to '*He is drinking coffee*'.

This should prove sufficient direction. However, it may be that

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some particularly weak groups will have difficulty completing the task adequately. For example, the speaker might not be saying much about the picture and/or might not be using the correct present tense. In addition the other learners in the group might not be helping by asking questions in an -ING form. In this case, the teacher could prompt those groups (or the class as a whole) with the following instructions:

T: Look at picture and write down all the words that you can think of that go with it. For example, *drink, wear, wait*. Now ask -ING questions to the speaker like: '*What is he drinking?*' '*What is he wearing?*' '*Who is he waiting for*'.

After such prompting no problems are anticipated to remain - except perhaps with vocabulary. In this case, the students could be asked to describe their picture once more -this time to the entire class. The class would be instructed to prompt the speaker with any missing vocabulary that seems appropriate to the picture. For example, a member of the class might prompt with 'stand', which should elicit, from the speaker, a sentence such as, 'he is standing on the street'.

Second variety of task - for Japanese Fourth Year University Students.

The original version of the task is considered suitable for Japanese university students in their first year largely because it is useful, and even vital, to review and consolidate an important distinction: the use of the present continuous in contrast to the present simple. By their fourth year of study, university students majoring in English have had a lot more experience with English. This is particularly true if they have spent a year

in an exchange program overseas - something which is becoming increasingly common in Japan. The following variation of the task is targeted towards this group of learners.

For this variation of the task, the **aim and rationale** are related somewhat to the original version, but with a different emphasis. Here the main aim is to get students to utilise a greater and more sophisticated range and combination of tenses, and in so doing, to activate a considerably wider vocabulary. Just as there is a need for first year university students in Japan to consolidate their skills in the use of the present tenses, there is an expectation and need for Japanese learners in their final year of university to have progressively built on these. In other words, to have consolidated their skills with more difficult verb tenses. The sub-aim is to push the extent of their imaginations in an attempt to make greater connections between their thoughts and experiences and the contents of the pictures. This, and the utilisation of more tenses, is expected to elicit from them rather longer, and more complex descriptions of their pictures than in the original version of the task, such that they will be inventing a story rather than providing a simple description of the contents of the picture. The rationale for this is based on the advanced skill and experiential levels of this group of learners compared with first year university students. Accordingly, in this variation, some of the pictures included in the pile, from which the students will select their favourites, can be more abstract than in the original version; but not all. This is because it is still possible to produce a more sophisticated and involved description of a simple picture by using a greater variety of tenses, and by using one's imagination more freely.

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The **procedure** for this variation of the task begins in the same way as the original, that is to say that learners choose a picture that interests them; they then describe it to the other learners. This time, however, learners are told to imagine what *happened before* the scene depicted in the picture. This brings into play a number of past tenses, including the past continuous, past simple and past perfect. Which tenses are used depends on the teacher's focus. For example, the teacher might instruct the students to describe what *was happening* or *going on* before the scene depicted in the photo. Obviously, the targeted grammatical form in this case will be the past continuous. Answers similar to the following example would be expected:

She was waiting for the bus; they were thinking about what they had to do that day, he was minding his own business; he was drinking a cup of coffee, etc.

An important skill is being able to distinguish successfully between the correct past tense and aspect and to combine them in a meaningful way, amongst other things, to show the relationship between events. One such combination is with the past continuous and the past simple. Note that this is a useful combination in story telling - the sub-aim of the task. Many students are not aware that in such sequences the former is used to provide background information: what *was happening*. However, the past simple highlights an event or action occurring at a specific point in time, or when combined with the past continuous - an interrupting event: what *happened* in the course of when something else was in progress. So for example, looking at a picture of a man sitting outside drinking a cup of coffee, a student might be expected to produce something similar to the following:

He was drinking a cup of coffee in a cafe when his girlfriend called him on his mobile telephone.

As in the original variation, the teacher closely monitors the language of the learners during the turn of the first speaker in the group. If any confusion or difficulties are noted these could be attended to before the second speaker's turn to describe their picture.

Some learners might erroneously use the past simple instead of the past continuous, as in the following:

He drank a cup of coffee when his girlfriend called him.

Addressing the whole class, the teacher could ask learners to think about what comes first in this sequence. This will produce the obvious answer that 'he drank coffee before his girlfriend called him'. The teacher could ask the learners to think about how long the man took to drink his coffee. A reasonable answer would be, for example, '10 minutes'. The teacher could then suggest to the learners that in the middle of those 10 minutes his girlfriend called him; and then ask them, 'what was he doing when his girlfriend called him?' The teacher might then take the opportunity to point out that when an event coming before another is suddenly interrupted by it, we say that the first one *was happening* or *being done*. The teacher would then proceed to have the second and third speakers in the group take their turns at describing a picture in this manner.

A further possible variation (with the fourth year university students) using the same pictures is to have learners first describe what is *happening* or *being done* in the pictures and then to have them imagine what

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is going to happen soon (say in five minutes or so). In other words, to target the use of the immediate future. This is also a good exercise in developing learners' imaginations. It is anticipated that the students will produce something similar to:

He is drinking coffee while waiting for his girlfriend. In five minutes, he is going to pay for the bill and leave.

Integrating the task with other macro skills

Let us now reconsider the original classroom task as presented and described in Part One. The macro skill focused on was that of speaking. In this section, I will show how the task can be integrated with the macro skills of writing and listening.

Let us assume that the students have successfully completed their speaking task, as outlined above. The teacher can now direct the students to write down their descriptions, encouraging them to include as much information as possible, and even getting the students to link the various descriptions into a kind of story. This could be done individually or in pairs or in groups. The advantage of working in groups or pairs is that the students are given the opportunity to negotiate language and meaning (Nunan, 1991). Here is an example:

He is drinking coffee and thinking of his girlfriend whom he loves so much. He is waiting for her to arrive, but she is very late. He is wondering where she is and hoping that she has not forgotten their date.

This writing task can then easily be extended into a listening task.

The procedure is as follows: The teacher collects all the students' written pieces. They are distributed amongst the class, making sure that each student receives a piece other than their own. The pictures are displayed so that they are visible to all the students. The students are then instructed to read out in turn the written work that they have in front of them. The other students are told to listen carefully and then to guess which pictures are being described.

A similar procedure could be followed for the easier and more difficult variations of the task outlined above, with the difference that, in the former, written work would consist of simple, short and unconnected sentences. In the more difficult version, the students would aim to complete an involved, integrated and imaginative story.

Conclusion

The possibilities for using pictures in classroom language tasks seem endless. They can be adapted for every skill level and can be used for the teaching of a prodigious number of language points, functions and activities. This paper concentrated on one task for a particular group of learners, targeting speaking, with the ultimate aim of correcting commonly observed errors in the use of present tenses in English. It first mentioned the rationale behind the task, and then went on to demonstrate in some detail how it could be presented. Finally, the paper suggested variations of the task for different learner groups and proficiencies, and ways of integrating other macro skills with the task. One of the benefits for the teacher of this type of task is that it is not very difficult to prepare, and once one task is completed, another variation or extension comes to mind. A great benefit to the student is that once one task is completed they become more familiar and adept with the use of pictures. This makes it relatively easy to build

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on previous tasks with different aims and variations.

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