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Eiken Picture Description Practice: A Sequence of Tasks

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Abstract: *Using the Eiken test as an example, this article demonstrates how tasks can be sequenced within two 50-minute lessons. The tasks feed into one another so that learners can see the purpose of having completed each one. The tasks also progress in complexity, better allowing learners to achieve greater complexity as well. Additionally, the benefits of task-based learning over traditional focus on forms approaches are discussed. These benefits include authentic communication and using language to accomplish goals other than mere language use.*

Keywords: *sequences, task-based learning, Eiken*

Task-based approaches to language learning provide considerable benefits over more traditional approaches such as focus on forms (FoFs). Task-based approaches are meaning-focused and goal-oriented. Learners use language to accomplish objectives. Thus communication is authentic and there is an emphasis on output and collaboration. Language is therefore more salient because learners learn by doing. This is compatible with the constructivist idea of situated learning (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). Learning by doing, as a type of embodied learning, also forms stronger neural connections according to cognitive linguistic theory (Holme, 2009). Furthermore, task-based approaches are more learner-centered than FoFs approaches. Whereas FoFs courses tend to move through rigidly preset structural syllabuses regardless of student development, task-based syllabuses tend to reflect student progress as well as recycle previously learnt material.

Such goal-oriented communicative use of language reflects Long's (1985) interaction hypothesis which states that language development takes place through interaction. Learners must attend to both input and output. Learners can receive negative evidence when their output is not understood and negotiation for meaning can then take place (Long, 1985).

Ideally, form-focused instruction (FFI) should be included in post-task stages of task-based lessons. This FFI should be reactive, based on language use

which arises during the task. Without such explicit language focus, learners often fail to notice structures they can use again in the future. This can also result in a lack of feeling of having learnt anything during lessons. Swain (1991) found that if FFI is not included in learning, then even students in meaning-focused immersion courses fail to make linguistic gains. Furthermore, Norris' and Ortega's (2000) meta-analysis showed the advantages of using FFI in language courses.

Task-based lessons typically consist of a series of increasingly complex pedagogical tasks which prepare the learner for a target task that resembles real-world language use scenarios. This paper presents an example of a task-based lesson plan which can occur over 1.5 to two hours of class time.

Method

Participants and Context

These lessons are designed for Japanese students in their final year of public high school. Students are typically of mixed proficiency and studying English as a required course. A needs analysis shows that most of these students will take English proficiency tests with speaking components for the purposes of entering university. The *Eiken* (specifically, the *Jitsuyo Eigo Gino Shiken* [Test of Practical English Proficiency]; Eiken Foundation of Japan, 2019) the most widely-used of these tests in Japan, requires students to verbally describe a series of illustrations. With this in mind, these task-based lesson materials are aimed at developing the learners' abilities to describe events they see in pictures.

Cook, N. (2019). *Eiken* picture description: A sequence of tasks. *OTB Forum*, 9(1), 73-80.

Instrumentation: Tasks

The objective of these two hours of instruction is for learners to be able to engage in the illustration narrative description task on the *Eiken* test. The target task, therefore, is an authentic recreation of that task (see Appendix A for examples of *Eiken* illustration tasks). All of the tasks chosen for these lessons fall into the task type of picture descriptions.

Procedure

A series of four unique tasks will be implemented over two 50-minute class sessions. Each task will increase in complexity until the final, target task.

Task 1: input-based narrative. The first task is the least cognitively complex. The goal of this task is to prime the learners to meaningfully engage with illustrations in preparation for the more complex picture tasks which follow. The learners are presented with several illustrations, listen to an audio description, and must decide which of the illustrations corresponds with the description.

In the pre-task phase, the instructor explains the task directions and demonstrates the activity. A worksheet with four to ten illustrations is distributed to each of the students. During the task phase, the audio description is presented to the entire class and learners determine the appropriate illustration.

During the task phase, the students will engage with the task in the same fashion as in the example. They will listen to descriptions and select the corresponding illustrations. Complexity can be manipulated to suit the proficiency level of the learners. Complexity can be increased by selecting illustrations which are similar to each other. For example, for a description including “The boy with the red hat is about to catch the baseball,” provide multiple illustrations containing the boy with the red hat playing baseball, however in one instance he is throwing the ball, in another he is holding a bat, and so on. Contrarily, complexity can be decreased by providing illustrations which are considerably different. For example, only the correct illustration might depict a boy interacting with a baseball.

During the post-task phase of this task the instructor elicits the correct responses for each audio description. The instructor can ask students to explain why each corresponding answer is correct. Following this answer check, FFI can begin. The instructor can elicit from students different ways to

express specific activities depicted in the illustrations.

Task 2: single illustration description. The second task builds in complexity from the previous input-based task by having the students produce their own descriptions of illustrations. This task resembles the task before it, but differs considerably because now the learner must produce linguistic descriptions rather than listen to them (see Appendix B for examples of illustrations which can be used).

During the pre-task phase, the instructor primes the learners by presenting the class with an illustration and eliciting as many descriptive sentences about actions occurring in the scene as they can construct. In this way, students activate their schemata for relevant vocabulary.

During the task phase, learners can work together in pairs to construct their own descriptions of subsequent illustrations. The first learner selects an illustration from a series of illustrations and describes it. This second learner must then select the appropriate illustration from a group of pictures similar to the procedure of Task 1. Complexity can be increased by changing the descriptions from here-and-now, present tense descriptions to there-and-then descriptions set in the past tense.

Then in the post-task phase, pairs can demonstrate the task again in front of the entire class. FFI can take place and other students provide alternative descriptions.

Task 3: spot the differences. Depending on how class time is allotted, this may be the first task of the second session of instruction. Students are put in pairs and each student receives a picture card they cannot share with their partner. The pictures strongly resemble each other but include 10 subtle differences. The students work together to identify the 10 differences through discussion. This task builds in complexity from the previous picture description activity because it requires similar descriptions but there is now a clearer goal to achieve through collaboration.

During the pre-task phase the previous picture description task is reviewed and the instructor demonstrates the current task. During the task phase, students work in pairs and perform the task as previously described. During the post-task phase the teacher elicits the differences from students before finally showing the two pictures to the entire class.

Task 4: target task: In this task, students describe what is happening across a sequence of pic-

tures. This task is intended to replicate a component of the *Eiken* test where the learner is provided a sequence of illustrations and describes the narrative displayed (again, see Appendix A for examples of illustrations appropriate for this task).

In the pre-task phase, the learners are informed that this is an authentic task similar or identical to what they will encounter on the *Eiken*. This will increase the authenticity and validity of the activity for the students. The task should be demonstrated to the students by a proficient student.

During the task, the learners can practice by working together to describe what happens in a provided sequence of illustrations. To challenge the students, they should subsequently perform the task individually by describing another set of illustrations to a partner or small group.

During the post-task phase, the task can be demonstrated again in front of the entire class. Corrective feedback and alternative descriptions should be provided. The learners should be pushed to provide as much detail in their descriptions as possible. The instructor can also reiterate how performance of this task connects to the *Eiken*. Finally, other advice for the *Eiken* can be given.

Discussion

Task Stages

When designing this sequence of tasks, Long's stages of task-based learning design were employed. Needs analysis led to choosing the target task and then pedagogical tasks were derived to support that target task (Long, 1985, 2000). First, students' needs were considered (Long, 2005) and developing *Eiken* picture description skills was selected as the primary desired learning outcome. Next, the target task which resembles the real-world activity the learners are expected to encounter on the *Eiken* outside the classroom was chosen (Brown & Lee, 2015; Willis & Willis, 2007). After that, a series of pedagogical tasks was developed to prepare the learners for that target task. As Brown and Lee (2015) noted, pedagogical tasks build towards allowing the learners to perform the target task. Furthermore, Willis and Willis (2007) characterized pedagogical tasks as functioning to prime the learners for each subsequent task, help them focus, and access their relevant background knowledge.

Each of the tasks is divided into pre-, main, and post-task phases, as Brown and Lee (2015) sug-

gested. Willis and Willis (2007) described the pre-task phase as the priming stage. This is when learners receive input about the tasks they are to engage in. This can take the form of the teacher directly explaining the task or topic. Alternatively, it can be accomplished by demonstrating the task in front of the classroom with volunteer students or showing video or audio recordings of the task being performed (Willis & Willis, 2007).

The main task phase is characterized by a focus on meaning. At this point, learners engage with each other in performing the task. The teacher refrains from explicit language-focused instruction as much as possible.

The post-task stage is typically where focus on form can be employed. If appropriate, learners receive explicit corrective feedback and alternative linguistic expressions at this stage (Brown & Lee, 2015). Feedback and alternative expressions should be elicited from other students before being provided by the instructor.

Task Sequencing

According to Robinson's cognition hypothesis, pedagogic tasks should increase in complexity until they approximate the demands of the real-world target tasks (Robinson & Gilabert, 2007). Specifically, Robinson predicted that increasing cognitive demands of tasks would promote greater accuracy and complexity of production as well as increased interaction, negotiation, and attention to forms (Robinson, 2007a).

Robinson's triadic componential framework for task classification provides factors for determining the complexity of a given task (Robinson, 2007a). When looking at this framework's task condition participation variables, the task sequence I have provided in the methods section inherently increase in complexity by increasing interactional demands. First, consider the one-way/two-way variable of Robinson's framework. Task 1 is an input-based scenario description. Information flows one way: from the instructor or a recording to the learner. In Task 2, where the learner describes a scenario to a partner, information still flows one way at a time but the learner must now produce the information (for the second learner, Task 2 functions the same way as Task 1). In Task 3, the spot-the-differences task, information flows two ways as learners collaborate and negotiate to determine 10 differences between

two similar illustrations, while each learner is only able to look at one illustration.

Using another of Robinson's task condition participation factors, open/closed tasks, complexity can be seen to increase as well. Task 1 is a closed task because there is only one illustration that correctly corresponds to the description. Task 2 is an open task for the learner who produces the picture description. This is more complex than Task 1 because the learner must construct their description. Task 3 is ultimately a convergent closed task because there are 10 specific differences that must be discovered. Even though this is a closed task, it is more complex than Task 2 because learners must negotiate with each other to arrive at the solution.

Robinson's (2007a) resource-directing task complexity factors are not inherent in the sequencing of these tasks, but should be attended to during implementation to ensure an appropriate challenge for the students' level. Each of the tasks can easily be manipulated to increase or decrease complexity according to Robinson's factors. Factors he provides as resource-directing include: few elements, here-and-now, and no reasoning demands. First, for the few elements factor, the illustrations used in any and all of the four tasks can contain as many or as few elements for learners to describe as the instructor desires. Fewer actions taking place in an illustration will be less cognitively challenging for learners to describe. If the task is repeated, then more challenging illustrations with more elements can be used. Second, with regard to here-and-now, if a higher degree of cognitive complexity is warranted by the students' proficiency, students can be instructed to construct their descriptions in the past tense as a there-and-then task. Third, no reasoning demands can be implemented in follow-up questions about illustrations. Such questions are used during the Eiken test and should be implemented in the target task. For example, on the Eiken test, after the illustration is described, the interviewer will ask a question such as "Look at the fourth panel. If you were the woman, what would you be thinking?" To increase or decrease complexity of the target task, the instructor can choose to use or omit that question. For the pedagogical tasks, the instructor may ask similar questions about the motives of characters appearing in the illustration during the post-task phase. Alternatively, instructions for the task can include that the learner must describe each charac-

ter's apparent thoughts or motives in addition to the physical description of the scenario.

Similarly, Robinson's (2007a) resource-dispersing task complexity factors should also be attended to when customizing the cognitive complexity of these tasks. These factors include *planning* and *prior knowledge*. First, planning refers to the amount of preparation time the learner is provided with before they must produce output. During the real-world *Eiken* test, in levels 1 and pre-1, learners are given one minute to observe the illustration and think about what they will say. During the lower-proficiency levels 2 and pre-2, students are given 20 seconds to prepare (however the illustrations and the demands of their descriptions are less complex than in the higher proficiency level tests). With regard to the pedagogical tasks, the instructor can provide as much or as little preparation time as they desire in order to affect complexity. Pre-task planning has been shown to provide benefits during task performance (Willis & Willis, 2007). Such learners produce lengthier, linguistically richer, more fluent, and more complex output (Ellis, 2003).

Second, Robinson's *prior knowledge* factor can be manipulated in the selection of the illustrations. To be less cognitively complex, the illustrations can contain actions and artefacts more familiar in the real-world to the learners. Alternatively, they can be topics the learners have greater experience talking about in their L2.

Conclusion

In contrast to a task-based approach, such as the one presented here, consider a more traditional FFI approach to the same material. Such an approach might involve extensive rote practicing of linguistic patterns, decontextualized from any specific task, during a significant part of the lesson. Once pattern practice has been completed, a single target task describing a sequence of pictures might be introduced without any priming tasks feeding into it. Learners might be expected to make the sudden jump from pattern practice to being able to implement those patterns without direct preparation for that new skill. This FFI approach might improve the learners' ability to use patterns, but it will not give them sufficient context in which to develop the skill of using those patterns in practice the way a task-based approach will.

Alternatively, consider the benefits of implementing a task-based approach. Here, the focus is on developing a skill (i.e., the ability to describe a situation) rather than on acquiring isolated linguistic knowledge (i.e., specific linguistic patterns). This skill development takes place because learners learn by doing the task and by interacting with peers to accomplish a goal. From a cognitive standpoint this improves language acquisition because learners experience using the language in a meaningful way. Meanwhile including intermittent, responsive FOFs instruction based on learner performances at the end of each priming task should mitigate grammatical errors. These reasons demonstrate how a task-based approach can much better prepare learners for real-world language use.

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Appendix A

Examples of Eiken Picture Description Illustrations

(Reproduced from Eiken Levels Pre-1 and 1: Ikoma, 2018).



Appendix A (continued)

Examples of Eiken Picture Description Illustrations

(Reproduced from Eiken Levels Pre-2 and 2: Ikoma, 2011).

Your story should begin with this sentence: **One day, Mr. and Mrs. Fujita were talking about Linda, who was coming from the United States the next week to stay with them.**



Your story should begin with this sentence: **One day, two office workers and their boss were talking about having a video conference.**



Your story should begin with this sentence: **One day, Kenji and his father were talking about a new Shinkansen train.**



Your story should begin with this sentence: **One summer day, Mr. and Mrs. Takahashi were talking about the “no idling campaign.”**



Appendix B

Examples of Illustrations Appropriate for Tasks 1 through 3

(Reproduced from Eiken Kawauchi, 2015)

