

# TASK BASED LEARNING AND AFFECTIVE FACTORS

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## **BACKGROUND**

These methods and evaluations discussed in this article arose out of a need to measure student participation in a group of EFL classrooms in Japan. At the institute where I currently teach, students are required two years of compulsory English language instruction. The Kinjo Gakuin Language Center which I work under has established the criteria in which students grades are to be evaluated, and for many classes there is a 30 percent participation grade that is a component of the students' final score for each semester. At first, measuring students' participation was difficult and arbitrary as I did not determine the means to render an evaluation. In my first couple of semesters teaching, student participation was determined mostly by how well each student distinguished herself in class; therefore, if I were able to facially identify a student upon reading the name on the class roster I would award more points for participation. Extroverted and unreserved students who I remembered for such actions as responding to a question; trying to engage me in English conversation; or simply just risk takers would receive higher points for the participation score. However, in a similar manner, students were remembered as their names would be associated with behavioral problems, such as talking in Japanese when instructed to practice English or during my lecture; not participating at all; or sleeping during an in-class assignment. The students in the middle (who were hardly noticed for either reason) were actually being overlooked and done a disservice for not having a means by which their efforts could be measured. It was at the end of my first year as a contracted teacher at Kinjo that I began to use a task based learning approach to regularly evaluate each student's participation grade.

## **TASK BASED LEARNING**

It was through task-based learning activities that provided the approach that I needed to effectively evaluate student participation on a regular basis. This is due to task based learning structure of presenting concise learning goals that can be reached by the students. Willis, who specializes in task based language learning TBL, has defined it as...

*a goal-oriented activity in which learners use language to achieve a real outcome. In other words, learners use whatever target language resources they have in order to solve a problem, make a list, do a puzzle, play a game, or share and compare experiences (J. Willis and D. Willis, 1996, p.53).*

As Willis points out, it is important to distinguish a language task from a language activity or drill. An activity will focus upon the practice of a grammatical form such as the present perfect (e.g. Have you ever been to...?); whereas a task's end goal would focus upon accomplishing an action or series of action for achievement. Such grammar drills and activities are prevalent in many of the practice conversations in the assigned textbook.

Nunan's (2004) own definition of task based learning is that it is a pedagogical task in which learners comprehend, manipulate, produce or interact in the target language, while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge whose intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form. Nunan's definition is important as it mentions the use of grammatical knowledge as task based learning has been criticized for focusing upon meaning and ignoring grammatical forms. Later in this article, we will see how one researcher addresses this problem.

Returning to my initial problem of measuring student participation was the difficulty of communicating to the student they were being evaluated for the assigned task. Increasing student participation was further achieved when being instructed that the task was a "speaking test" which was to be evaluated usually in the last 20 minutes of the lesson. As exams in the Japanese educational system are highly utilized, they are the primary means of measuring student achievement in academia and society. In explaining the activity, the term "test" was used to let students know that the activity will be recorded as part of their grade. The result of using the word "test", as it is an emotionally charged one, increased the level of participation for many of the students. Thus, many of the students with great seriousness sought to accomplish the task and master the targeted material.

### **Language Learning Anxiety**

The task being presented as "a test" created much anxiety for the students, which needed to be addressed. It is expedient, though, to have an overview of language learning anxiety and anxiety as it is generally defined as it becomes related to task based activities. Spielberg defines general anxiety as "the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system." (Horwitz, 2001, p. 113) In addition to this, there is anxiety that stems from social factors within the language learning classroom as it is related to performance before others and receiving a negative evaluation from teachers and peers. Andraide and Williams (2009) claimed that "physical symptoms can include, for example, rapid heartbeat, muscle tension, dry mouth, and excessive perspiration. Psychological symptoms can include embarrassment, feelings of helplessness, fear, going blank, and poor memory recall and retention among others. (p. 4)". Each of these would be classified as debilitating anxiety as they would directly affect the performance of a student while being evaluated for a language learning task.

Horwitz and Cope were influential in distinguishing language learning anxiety as a construct from

other anxieties which are found in the classroom such as communication and test anxiety (Dornyei, 2004). Their research and that of others have shown language learning anxiety produces a negative influence on the language learning process. Horwitz (2001) stated that language anxiety was actually higher during spoken activities when compared to reading or listening activities. In addition to this cause of anxiety, she stated that certain conditions in the classroom increase language anxiety, which result directly from the behavior of teachers, such as calling on individual students, teaching and requiring that the language be a massive memorization task, and being insensitive to students' out of class obligations. To conclude, Arnold and Brown (Dornyei, 2005) have stated in their study that "Anxiety is quite possibly the affective factor that most pervasively obstructs the learning process." (p.198)

### **Facilitative Anxiety**

Overall, though, there is a multi-faceted view of anxiety involving many factors. Ellis has distinguished anxiety as being beneficial/facilitative vs. inhibitory/debilitating anxiety as one group of major components. When studying language learning anxiety, it is important to define which of the anxieties is being addressed as each type will influence the learning process.

Although much has been written regarding the debilitating effects of language learning anxiety, researchers, as Scovel in Dornyei (2005), have pointed out, that it may actually enhance performance. Scovel, while studying anxiety among sports psychologists, noted that moderate levels of anxiety need not necessarily be debilitating in nature and in certain situations mild and even high levels of anxiety actually increases performance. Brown (2000) disagrees that all forms of anxiety should not be eliminated entirely as that anxious feelings before speaking in public is a sign of facilitative anxiety which may be "just enough tension to get the job done" (p.152). Indeed, I have found that the anxiety caused by assigned speaking tasks give rise to the opportunity for helping students manage their anxiety by utilizing language learning strategies, which in some cases actually increased language performance.

One of the anxieties that many students face is speaking in front of others. However, as Willis (2007) points out that task-based learning is essentially done in pairs or groups. This leads to what I have found especially useful as task based learning assists in language anxiety reduction through collaborative learning.

### **COLLABORATIVE LEARNING**

It is important to take note that certain aspects of collaborative learning are quite suitable for working in societies that are communal in their orientation such as Japan. Lee (1999) cites Olsen and Kagen, who defined collaborative learning as being "dependent on the socially structured exchange of information between learners in groups and for which each learner is held accountable for his own or her own learning and is motivated to increase the learning of others." (p.119). In addition to this, Lee also, when examining the Japanese classroom dynamics, noted that there are many activities within a Japanese school, where students function in groups, such as the daily cleaning of the classroom, school festivals, and other activities. He holds that because of the socialization and interdependency that takes

place within school Japanese students are more apt to engage in collaborative learning. Johnson and Johnson state that collaborative learning provides students the opportunity to maximize their abilities as student groups work towards their goals (p.24-28). They both state that the basic elements of cooperative learning are

1. Positive Interdependence
2. Individual accountability
3. Face to face promotive interaction
4. Social skills
5. Group processing

Positive interdependence is the perception of being linked to another in that you cannot succeed unless the other members of the group do as well. Individual accountability is the group monitoring each other and providing useful feedback to accomplish the task. In this manner the students are promoting learning amongst each other. Face-to-face promotive interaction is the logical outflow of the first two conditions, where students realize and promote each members success. Furthermore, collaborative learning facilitates the use of social skills as participants need to not only relate to one another, but organize, delegate, build trust, and manage conflicts within the group. Group processing is when the members evaluate their progress in meeting its goals and suggesting and implementing changes which produces both efficiency and effectiveness. These are the elements which consist of cooperative learning, and I have witnessed many of them amongst my students when working in pairs and groups to perform a task. Many of these features are easily attested to as student pairs exchange information between each other and other groups.

As task based learning would be undertaken in class, I was surprised at some of the occurrences in class. Japanese students have a reputation for being very reserved in the classroom, which results in the students not asking the teachers any questions. Through task based learning activities and working cooperatively, students have shown increased levels of responsibility while seeking to confirm with me pronunciation, the accuracy of translated words, and correct application of grammatical rules. All of these features have emerged when students work collaboratively on their tasks.

Regarding the reduction of language learning anxiety, when presented with the option of working and being tested collaboratively, the majority of students preferred working together rather than being evaluated individually. Many of the students acknowledged that engaging in conversation with one another was a less daunting task than speaking directly with the teacher.

But does collaborative testing reduce test anxiety? According to Breedlove, Burkett, and Winfield (2004) it did not in their research where there was no correlation between collaborative testing and the reduction of test anxiety. Students taking the targeted exam independently showed little difference in the amount of test anxiety than those working with a partner. However, one interesting point that needs further investigation is that their findings were based on partners that had not worked together prior to this research. As they stated, "Our findings are based on comparisons between two tests when students did not also engage in prior collaborative learning or get to know their test partners prior to

the collaborative test.” (p.40) This difference may be essential in demonstrating why there was no difference in test anxiety between those that engaged in collaborative testing and those that did not. This characteristic of their research differed from the practices of classes that regularly employ collaborative learning methods. During the course of a school year the students do know each other and are more secure in their relationships.

### **CRITICISM OF TASK BASED LEARNING**

Task based learning has been criticized for focusing more upon meaning than on forms. The emphasis of this approach is having students use whatever linguistic tools available to them to communicate their message. The criticism of language teachers was that form was a secondary issue for many students. Hawkes in his study found that if students repeated the task more attention was given to the accuracy of forms. As the students need to memorize the task or conversation many of them must focus on form as it is a part of the criteria being evaluated. However, in my teaching experience using this method that many students need to focus on form as memorization is a requirement of the task since using note cards or hard copies is not permissible for many of the ‘speaking tests’. Therefore, I have found that by having students memorize the targeted material that attention to accuracy will be achieved at a higher level.

Another short coming of task assigned language memorization is its duration. Hawke’s recommendation that material should be repeated is necessary for the promotion of the accuracy of linguistic forms. Rob Batstone (ELT Journal) states that once a task is repeated mental space is made for the awareness of linguistic forms and learning other aspects of the language. In addition, it is ideal if the students are able to remember the task after their performance has been evaluated. The familiar adage of “use it or lose it” is one that needs to be followed, but it is often challenging as time given for repetitive practice is frequently limited to curriculum objectives and restraints. As Stevick (1982) “Whether new material makes it from STM (short-term memory) to LTM (long-term memory) at all, and how long it remains there, are largely affected by how much work the learner’s mind does on it while it is still on the STM worktable (p.30). Indeed, reviewing evaluated material is necessary if it is to be retained.

### **TASK BASED LEARNING AND LANGUAGE LEARNING ANXIETY**

During the assignment of tasks, opportunities are given to teach language learning strategies. As the students are about to engage in oral presentations, it is expedient to provide them with strategies that will assist them especially ones regarding the management of their anxiety. Noormohamadi (2009) in his research regarding foreign language anxiety and language learning strategy usage discovered that affective strategies were the least ones used by students when undergoing tasks and oral examinations. As the students are to be evaluated for their speaking, providing them with strategies and techniques to manage their anxiety is appropriate and conducive to their performance. Oxford (1990) lists the following affective sub-set strategies: lowering one’s anxiety, encouraging one self, and taking your emotional temperature with each set listing specific actions learners may take. Preparing students for

oral tasks allows all three of the strategy sub-sets to be utilized thereby alleviating any debilitating influence that language learning anxiety may have. The first applied strategy is having students take their emotional temperature. This is simply done by inquiring if the students are “nervous” about their oral exams or their presentations, which is usually asked twice; once, when addressing the class as a whole, and then for each of the individual groups while meeting the teacher prior to evaluations. Although the answer to the question is obvious by merely observing many of the groups, the question is significant as it allows the students to acknowledge their own anxiety and then start to address it. As stated above Noormohamadi recommends that the instructor need to teach affective strategies because they are the least employed by learners during oral examinations. Furthermore, the question and the following strategy instruction allow students to realize that the instructor is empathizing with them and their situation, which modifies the belief that rather than acting as a judge who is merely critiquing them, the teacher is supporting the students and desires them to achieve success. Such advice is given by instructing students to employ deep breathing and other relaxing techniques which are employed to lower anxiety (Oxford, 1990).

In the *Feeling Good Handbook*, Dr. David Burns (1999) writes about the application of cognitive behavioral therapy regarding depression, anxiety, panic attacks, and other disorders. He writes that cognitive therapy is based on the premise that your thoughts, not external events, make you upset.” (p. 210) He continues by stating that it is how external events are interpreted and their understood meanings by individuals that arouse such negative feelings. Thus, if an individual can change the way they think, fears, anxieties, nervousness and panic can be overcome (p. 210). Many fears are caused by negative predictions about situations about to be faced.

As Burns’ audience are laypeople, he addresses many of the daily life struggles people face, including two of which address language learning, which are test anxiety and fears regarding public speaking. Although there exists the probability of failing a test or doing poorly during an observation, Burns states that it is always beneficial to always challenge such negative thoughts. It is at this point that cognitive behavioral therapy in the form of positive self talk can be employed. As many Japanese students believe that they lack the competence to speak English, this belief may be addressed in the following manner. As tasks are frequently conducted in the classroom, many students will have hopefully performed previous tasks successfully. Teachers may use the students’ records of previous successes to counter the belief that they lack the competence to speak English. By displaying such a positive record, a rational reason for probable success will not only be mere optimistic thinking, but will have a realistic foundation for students to have better confidence in their language abilities.

Burns approach to cognitive behavioral therapy, or mood therapy as he presents it in lay terminology, can be an effective means of helping students relieve anxiety. It is not in the scope of this article to examine many of Burns techniques, but is recommended for providing teachers with a framework for addressing students’ fears as he has devoted several chapters related to test and performance anxiety, public speaking, and interviews.

As many language teachers and researchers have stated debilitating anxiety should be eradicated.

However, it would be impossible to alleviate all anxiety during a speaking evaluation or presentation. What is useful and a highly applicable strategy is that after having students take their emotional temperature is to advise and even encourage them to use their anxiety. As the learners' emotional energies are heightened for their evaluations, it is to their advantage to instruct them to use that energy. This is done by advising them to harness this energy, especially in their voices. Students can use their energy to speak louder than they normally would during their evaluations. Furthermore, they can make facial expressions and use body language such as gestures and their postures to communicate more effectively. Even by offering the option of either sitting or standing while conducting the evaluation can help the student utilize their anxiety in a positive manner. Finally, smiling at their group members during the evaluation is another effective technique students may employ as it is also culturally acceptable in Japan to smile during times of embarrassment or nervousness. All of this advice is given for the purpose of having students accept and work with anxious feelings rather than having them attempt to achieve a tension free state. Indeed, some students have learned that their "nervousness" is an aid to improved performance during presentations while executing these techniques.

Another strategy that can be encouraged is the use of props, realia and pictorial displays. The affective feature of these items is that for both the speaker's and the listeners' attention is diverted from being solely upon the speaker, but also placed upon the displayed item; thus reducing the anxiety of being watched and critiqued by others. The presented items also provide speakers with mental cues and may act as "note cards" during presentations thereby supporting the difficult task relying solely upon memory to recall the targeted language.

## **FUTURE STUDY**

Unfortunately, many of my conclusions are based on observation only, and are not taken from the students' perspectives. There are questions that need to be asked such as does collaborative testing lower test anxiety contrary to claims of Breedlove, Burkett, and Winfield. Other questions would be measuring the distinction between test anxiety and language learning anxiety, and which one is predominant during evaluation. Related to the two anxieties, what strategies can be used to alleviate one or the other or both of them? There are also a number of questions which need to be answered regarding how the students interacted with another and if such elements of accountability, interdependence, and promotive interaction assisted them in their language learning and in the management of their anxiety? Were they more motivated to study English by working with a student? More important what are the students' current attitudes towards English by becoming more positive or negative? Were task based learning and cooperative learning approaches suitable for a Japanese learning environment? Have their views changed about English language learning as a result of performing task based learning? How effective were the learning strategies regarding anxiety reduction and what do students employ to lower anxiety? Lastly did learning together have an positive influence on them?

## CONCLUSION

As Dörnyei (2005) points out from his research and that of others that self esteem is tied to self efficacy. In presenting students with a record of their successes should accomplish this. Deacon, Murphey, and Dore (2006) in their collection of student produced language learning histories found that a major recurring theme for students is their desire to achieve success in their language studies. As Dörnyei (2001) point outs that when students believe in the probability they will perform a task successfully motivation and effort will increase. Task based learning can provide students with such experiences, using manageable language tasks that will be able to create such motivation and more earnest participation from students. Furthermore, through language learning strategies and cooperative learning, anxiety will be lowered to a state where it is then utilized to improve language performance and assist in the quality of language teaching and learning that students will undergo. It is my hope as a teacher that such cultural exchanges whether personal or cultural will be pursued beyond the compulsory two year requirement of English education at my institute.

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