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Authors

Kelch, Ken

Yang, Ju Yin

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Integrating the Task-Based Approach Into Content Curriculum

Content-based instruction (CBI) is a curricular option that enables second language learners to develop their language skills when the primary pedagogical focus is course content rather than linguistic analysis. In such a case, the course remains, ostensibly, a language class. But it is also possible to help students develop their language skills within the context of an academic subject-area course that they are already taking. This paper reports on a project to assist students in learning academic course content while at the same time engaging them in class activities that promote the development of their language skills. In a business English course taught in the San Diego Community College District, a task-based approach was implemented on a pilot basis as a means of providing international students with opportunities to acquire academic knowledge via a series of tasks designed to improve their target language skills. Such a task-based model allows students not only to meet their content-area needs but also to increase their second language proficiency through learner-centered, content-centered, and meaning-based instruction in a collaborative setting.

Introduction

Even after receiving language instruction in ESL programs designed to prepare them for academic course work, second language students may still lack sufficient language skills to adequately perform in mainstream academic classes. What can be done to assist such students who have advanced beyond ESL classes to continue to develop their language proficiency while in the context of acquiring content knowledge? Research indicates that this is achievable through content-based instruction (CBI). Content-based instruction involves “classes in which students practice English language skills—reading, writing, speaking, listening, and grammatical forms—in the process of studying one subject area” (Pally, 2000, p. vii). The same theoretical principles apply to the situation in which students are in a content course that is not in and of itself designed to improve their language skills.

In this case, appropriately designed tasks and activities in content courses can provide students with many and varied opportunities to develop the academic

proficiency that is necessary to be a successful participant in the American educational system. These academic language skills, as noted by Grabe and Stoller (1997), “require more complex language abilities [and] are best taught within a framework that manipulates more complex and authentic content” (p. 8).

As Brinton, Snow, and Wesche (1989) describe, the activities in CBI “are geared to stimulate students to think and learn through the use of the target language. Such an approach lends itself quite naturally to the integrated teaching of the four traditional language skills” (p. 2). A task-based approach is an ideal vehicle for providing just such a framework for engaging in complex language abilities. Branden (2006) states that a task-based approach helps make linguistic input comprehensible, while learners are stimulated to produce the target language, interact with people, collaborate with team members, and engage in negotiation of meaning.

As such, a task-based approach provides multiple opportunities for students to engage in meaningful, real-world tasks related to their current or future lives beyond the academic context: “Task-based learning involves the specification not of a sequence of language items, but of a sequence of communicative tasks to be carried out in the target language” (Willis, 1996, p. 173). Thus, communicative tasks offer more opportunities for learners to engage in meaningful exchanges, during which teachers can examine language outcomes and provide for linguistic and content evaluation (Willis, 1996). As Ellis (2003) states, “A task requires the participants to function primarily as ‘language users’ in the sense that they must employ the same kinds of communicative processes as those involved in real-world activities” (p. 3). The language teaching and learning literature is replete with various definitions of “task,” and Table 1 sets forth several perspectives.

Table 1
Definitions of Task

<i>Author</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Nunan	1989	“Task as a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form.” (p. 10)
Willis	1996	“Tasks are always activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome.” (p. 23)
Skehan	1998	“A task requires personal information to be exchanged, or a problem to be solved, or a collective judgment to be made and bears a relationship to things that happen outside the classroom.” (p. 38)
Ellis	2003	“A task is a work plan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed. To this end, it requires them to give primary attention to meaning and to make use of their own linguistic resources,

although the design of the task may predispose them to choose particular forms. A task is intended to result in language use that bears a resemblance, direct or indirect, to the way language is used in the real world.” (p. 16)

Background

Given the research on content-based instruction and the importance of tasks in language teaching, a task-based approach to teaching academic content appears to be a suitable method to use in academic courses. One of the authors (Ju Yin Yang) is an assistant professor at Kainan University in the Department of Applied English and has studied principles of task-based instruction with the other author (Ken Kelch), a TESOL professor and teacher trainer. To gain hands-on experience in how the task-based approach might be implemented, Yang found a content-area course at a local San Diego college that had a high percentage of international students who might benefit from learning academic content in a language-rich environment. In addition, she did a one-year internship for the Introduction to Business class at this college.

The authors decided to implement elements of a task-based curriculum in an academic business course on a pilot basis, incorporating their knowledge of task-based language teaching and knowledge of the students' needs and expectations for this particular subject. Yang was responsible for developing and implementing a task-based module. The purpose of doing so was to explore effective ways of promoting integrated language use in a business academic course with the goal of enabling students to access their academic language skills in the learning of course content.

Introduction to Business

The content course described in this study is an Introduction to Business course at Miramar College in San Diego, California. This course provides the foundation of business knowledge for students in the Department of Business. This course, as conceived by the regular instructor, followed an approach of explicit delivery of content via lectures, small-group discussion of business case studies, and traditional question/response assessment measures. Yang's goal was to understand what the role of a language teacher should be in an academic business course and how to help lower-level learners keep up with the class.

Textbook and Materials

The main textbook the instructor used was Shiveley and Martin's (2002) *21st Century Business Principles and Practices (6th ed.)*, which was combined with a workbook. Each week, the main instructor (content instructor) and Yang (intern faculty) gave students various lecture worksheets to complete for each chapter.

Students

The nonnative-speaking students in this for-credit content course came from countries and regions such as France, Germany, Hong Kong, Italy, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Taiwan, Vietnam, and Russia. Their English proficiencies were quite varied: All students can register for this course according to their needs,

interests, or job-related requirements, and nonnative-speaking students can register regardless of English proficiency level. Hence, the main instructor and adjunct instructor thought this was an ideal situation into which to integrate elements of a task-based approach to foster the students' English development while simultaneously delivering content instruction.

In addition to the linguistic benefits of the task-based approach when applied to content area instruction, both instructors saw an opportunity to draw upon the students' international backgrounds in order to promote cross-cultural exchange. The business course was an ideal venue for this since "cultural and linguistic diversity are viewed as a reflection of the global business world" (Boyd, 2002, p. 54). Therefore, the tasks designed for this business curriculum focused on meaning-based cross-cultural awareness so that students could share knowledge about their own countries' business practices when discussing international business issues.

In sum, we saw the following question as guiding our efforts to infuse tasks into the academic curriculum: How can teachers best design a course that will assist their students in meeting their academic and real-world needs while at the same time helping them develop their language skills? In answer to this question, we believe that insights from second language teaching and learning theories allow us to bridge the divide that often exists when L2 learners become members of the L1 academic community.

Putting the Theory Into Practice

A task-based approach is learner centered, meaning based, and collaborative. The learning environment is less directive and the teacher acts principally as a facilitator. According to Skehan (1998, as cited in Nunan, 2006), there are five characteristics of the task-based approach:

1. Meaning is primary.
2. Learners are not given other people's meaning to regurgitate.
3. There is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities.
4. Task completion has some priority.
5. The assessment of the task is in terms of outcome. (p.16)

When using a task-based approach, the instructor chooses topics and designs tasks that are associated with learners' needs, meet their expectations, and address their learning goals. The framework shown in Table 2 guided the design of the pilot lessons. Following Ellis (2003), we incorporated a pretask, the task itself, and post-task activities. The selection of tasks was also informed by Willis and Willis (2007), who advocate using task types such as: listing, matching, ordering/sorting, comparing/contrasting, problem solving, sharing personal experiences, and creative tasks and projects.

Table 2
Framework of a Task-Based Lesson

<i>Phase</i>	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Pretask	Introduce the topic and prepare students to perform the task.	Observe model of the task. Activate topic schema. Task planning opportunity
During task	Undertake and execute the actual task.	Provide students data needed to complete the task. Instructor monitoring of student performance
Post-task	Opportunity to repeat or expand task Allow reflection of task.	Student presentation and other public performances of task Report summarizing task outcomes

In this task-based instruction trial, two class sessions (5 hours total) incorporated a series of tasks in which all language skills were addressed in the students' performance of the activities. In this way, the students had the opportunity to receive and work with course content in an environment that required a variety of linguistic skills and outcomes.

Description of Task-Based Instruction Sequence

Using the framework described above, this section details the task-based activities carried out in the class.

Pretask: An Introduction to Leadership

At the beginning of the class, students were given general definitions of leadership. Most books provide various definitions of leadership. Students could also share their own definitions from the business leadership field. Students thus built an understanding of the basic concept of leadership (Appendix A).

Then students read two relevant articles (one double-sided page for each article) about successful leaders in the US and shared information about successful leaders from their countries. Students were also asked to share different countries' points of view about being a successful leader. For example, one of the Vietnamese students said that in her country, a leader is considered successful if he or she earns lots of money and controls the power to change the world. In contrast, in the US, a successful leader has particular personal characteristics and presents a vision for the future.

Then students were given examples of two successful CEOs in the US: Carly Fiorina, chairman of Hewlett-Packard, and John Chambers of Cisco. Students had opportunities to express their ideas and have group discussions. At the same time, students were given five questions to answer. This task encouraged students to build their knowledge before they watched a related video. Table 3 shows the language focus of each of the pretask activities.

Table 3
Pretask Activities

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Language focus</i>
Teacher presents general definition of leadership.	Global listening
Individual students generate personal definition of leadership.	Writing
Groups share leadership definitions, emphasizing cultural aspects.	Speaking, listening, clarifying intentions
Students read two articles about successful business leaders in the US.	Reading comprehension
Class discussion of successful leaders, including cross-cultural comparisons	Speaking, listening, negotiating meaning
Class discussion of articles, highlighting gender in leadership issues	Clarifying meaning, sharing experiences, schema building

Task Activities: Two Examples of Good Leaders (Collaborative Activity)

Next, students watched a video that included these two leaders' stories and ideas on how they successfully led their respective companies. Students were asked to take notes while watching the videos, noting five things the successful leaders mentioned in the video (Appendix B).

After viewing the video, students in groups compared Carly Fiorina and John Chambers. Additionally, students used a Venn diagram (Appendix C) to write down the similarities and differences they found. Students shared their ideas about the films, expressed their thoughts about leadership, and rephrased the notes they took. At this stage, students prepared a short summary about leadership. The activities in this phase are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4
Task Activities

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Language focus</i>
Students watch video presenting two leaders' stories.	Extended listening comprehension, note taking
Groups share notes and review information gleaned from video.	Speaking, listening, summarizing, synthesizing
Students create Venn diagram of similarities/differences between leaders.	Negotiating meaning, categorizing
Students write paragraph summary of information from the video.	Summary writing, accurate grammatical and meaning expression

Post-Task Activities: Good Leaders Show Their Vision for the Future

Students shared their compare-and-contrast findings with the whole class, filling out a worksheet (Appendix D) to help them organize the information they received.

After the class activities, the students were asked to write a short summary about leadership. Students had a chance to work with teachers and classmates, and then they practiced peer correction on the finished summaries. By editing classmates' summaries, students learned about differences between their classmates and themselves. In the task-outcomes phase, students wrote and rewrote their short summaries; in addition, they learned how to solve the problems they encountered during the peer correction. Yang gave each student brief feedback at the end of class.

At the end of each class period after these two modified sessions, students had to complete a simple assignment that focused on their assigned chapters, such as doing interviews, answering questions, or doing a presentation. Students could work individually or with a small group. The most important thing was that the assignment provide an opportunity for students to review their academic knowledge and language skills.

Table 5 summarizes the activities in the post-task phase of the lesson.

Table 5
Post-Task Activities

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Language focus</i>
Sharing of paragraph summary with group	Reading others' written work
Completion of worksheet synthesizing information from group summaries	Note-taking synthesis
Writing of extended summary of video content	Summary writing, accurate grammatical and meaning expression
Peer review of and feedback on summaries	Reading and analyzing others' written work, explaining feedback commentary
Revision of summary	Incorporating written and oral feedback to improve grammatical accuracy, fluency of expression, and content development
Teacher oral feedback on total lesson experience, synthesizing the experience, highlighting cross-cultural implications	Global and selective listening, validation of individual culture
Homework/extended task: Students find a restaurant representing their cultural heritage and interview manager/owner on the experience of operating a small business in the US. Students write a paper based on the interview.	Integrating numerous language-processing and production skills

Yang's Reflection on the Experience

Working in a multicultural teaching environment was a new experience for her. Most of students came from outside the US and were bilingual or even trilingual speakers. She found that they held strong cultural connections with their own countries. Therefore, integrating a task-based approach provided them with not only the opportunity to share their own cultural experiences, but also the chance to engage in collaborative learning with students from other backgrounds.

During the pilot instruction period, she found three main benefits of using a task-based approach when integrated into the academic content class:

1. Focus on students' needs: The regular instructor and Yang conducted an oral survey of the students at the beginning of the class, and they were able to consider the content and language needs of this student population. Yang found that it was important to understand students' expectations of what their goals were before and after completing this course.
2. Collaborative learning: The task-based approach provided opportunities for students to solve problems, share their knowledge and experiences, and use a variety of language skills. The students gained the opportunity to experience critical thinking during the class activities and to learn how to work with others.
3. Connect with real-world business skills: In the class activities the students were able to prepare knowledge and skills—both content and language-based—that were connected to their future real-world business experiences.

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Authors

Ken Kelch is a professor of TESOL and director of the International Language Education and Culture Center at Alliant International University, San Diego, California. His research interests are teacher education/development and narrative inquiry methodology.

Ju Yin Yang is an assistant professor at Kainan University, Taoyuan, Taiwan. Her research interests are task-based teaching and learning, computer-assisted instruction, and online education assessment.

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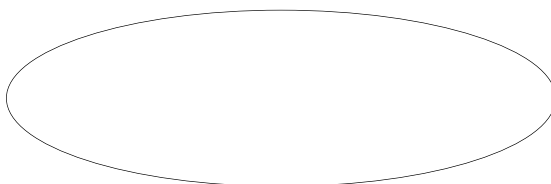
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Appendix A
Share Ideas—(Pretask)

Name: _____ **Class:** _____ **Date:** _____ :

Topic:



Teacher's Definition:

Your Own Definition:

Others' Definitions:

Appendix B
Note-Taking—(Task)

Name: _____ **Class:** _____ **Date:** _____ :

Name of the successful leaders in video:

- 1.
- 2.

The companies they work with:

- 1.
- 2.

The supporting ideas about leadership:

First leader:

First: _____

Next: _____

Next: _____

Next: _____

Finally: _____

Second leader:

First: _____

Next: _____

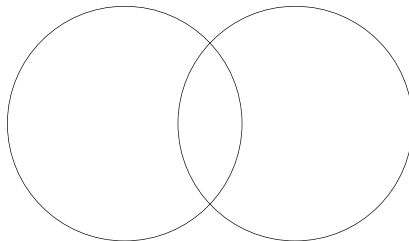
Next: _____

Next: _____

Finally: _____

Appendix C
Venn Diagram—(Task)

Name: _____ **Class:** _____ **Date:** _____ :



Appendix D
Information in Your Own Words—(Task Outcomes)

Name: _____ **Class:** _____ **Date:** _____ :

Ideas from video

Discuss ideas with partners

Rewrite in your own words

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

One-paragraph summary: