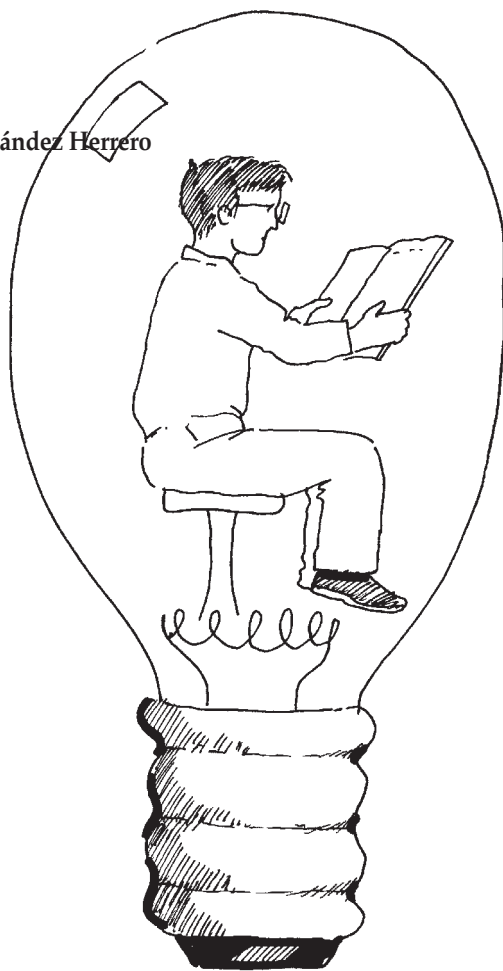# *Characteristics of successful tasks which promote oral communication*

Annabelle Hernández Herrero

Abstract

This paper presents the results of a survey carried out with a group of experienced EFL teachers on the characteristics of successful tasks. Their opinions are compared with those of specialists in the field. In addition, the opinions of a group of second-year students taking an oral communication course, about tasks which helped them to improve their oral communication skills will also be included. Samples of communicative tasks will be given together with the procedure to be followed to carry them out successfully.

Resumen

Este artículo presenta los resultados de una encuesta que se llevó a cabo con un grupo de profesores y profesoras con experiencia en la Enseñanza del Inglés como Lengua Extranjera sobre las características de las tareas exitosas. Las opiniones se comparan con las de especialistas en el campo. Además se presentan las opiniones de un grupo de alumnos de inglés de segundo año del curso Comunicación Oral I de la Universidad de Costa Rica sobre las actividades que más les ayudaron a mejorar su producción oral. También se incluyen ejemplos de tareas comunicativas y los procedimientos por seguir para llevarlas a cabo en forma exitosa.

KEY WORDS
survey, opinions, characteristics, task, successful, communicative, specialists in the field, EFL/ESL, improve

PALABRAS CLAVE
encuesta, opiniones, características, tarea, exitosa, comunicativa, especialistas en el campo, inglés como lengua extranjera/segunda lengua, mejorar

INTRODUCTION

Language teachers are always looking for effective tasks to use in their classes. But what makes an activity successful? How do teachers know that what they are doing really works? A group of experienced instructors who have worked in Costa Rica for many years were asked what they thought were the most important characteristics of effective tasks. In addition, a research project was carried out in an oral communication course at the University of Costa Rica during the second semester of 2004. Twenty-one second-year students participated in the project. One of the objectives of the project was to identify which tasks best promoted the students' oral participation. Several tasks were tested, and the students expressed their opinions and ranked the tasks according to their effectiveness in promoting oral participation and improving their oral communication skills.

This article reports the results of both projects and compares the teachers' opinions with those of experts in the field. In addition, samples of communicative tasks are given together with the procedure to be followed to carry them out successfully.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to Willis (1996), research studies have produced conflicting results about the effectiveness of one teaching method over another. However, there are certain basic principles that can help teachers select and design useful classroom tasks that are most likely to stimulate learning. She says that most researchers would agree that in order for anyone to learn a language with reasonable efficiency, three essential conditions must be met. These are basic enough to apply to all learners, regardless of their individual cognitive styles. These principles are (1) the provision of exposure to the target language, (2) the provision of opportunities for learners to use the target language for real communication and (3) the provision of motivation for learners to engage in the learning process, that is, motivation to process the input they receive, and motivation to use the target language as often as possible in order to benefit from exposure and use. Exposure, use, and motivation then are the three essential conditions to successful language learning. One without the others, or even two, is not enough. She adds that there is also one additional condition that is desirable, though not essential. This fourth condition is the provision of focused instruction, that is, drawing attention to language form in order for the students to improve more rapidly and to continue improving.

In this section, a brief discussion of each of the essential conditions for successful language learning is included. All good language learners benefit from **exposure** to rich input of real spoken and written language in use. Although input is very important, it is not enough. It has to be comprehensible; that is, the students have to be able to understand the messages. There are different ways to make input comprehensible, for instance, selecting familiar topics, making use of pictures, illustrations, realia, body language and gestures, rephrasing, and training students to use learning strategies. Krashen insists that comprehensible input is the one necessary (and sufficient) criterion for successful language acquisition. However, Swain's research studies (1985 in Richards & Rogers 2002) have shown that output activities – providing opportunities for the students to **use** the language – are critical for full language development (p. 228). In order to get good results, it is important to create a positive, supportive, low-stress atmosphere so that students will feel at ease and participate actively. Well-structured pair and group work activities and cooperative learning techniques are a great help because students feel more confident and willing to take risks. Willis (1996) recommends teachers to keep in mind that some beginners need an initial silent period to store words and phrases they can use when they are ready to speak; other learners want to start speaking as soon as possible (13). Therefore, teachers should be sensitive and pay attention to these individual differences when they plan lessons. The third condition is **motivation**: motivation to process the input students receive and motivation to use the target language. Motivation, the willingness to take risks and to use the language outside the classroom, charac-terizes most good language learners.

As it was mentioned before, exposure, use and motivation are the three essential conditions for language acquisition. However, some learners fossilize or can stop improving unless they are made aware of language form. So, a fourth condition is desirable: **instruction**. If focus on form is neglected, students might become very fluent but at the expense of accuracy, and this lack of accuracy will hinder comprehensibility (p.11-16). Spada (1990 in Nunan, 1999) reviewed several research studies on the most successful type of curricular organization and concluded that classrooms that were communicative in orientation but that provided opportunities for explicit grammatical instruction were superior to both traditional, grammar-based courses and to immersion programs in which there was no formal instruction in grammar (p.47).

Defining Task, activity, and exercise

Tasks have long been used in second/foreign language teaching (ESL/EFL) as a way to promote communication and language use. They have been defined in different ways:

A task is a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward. Thus, examples of tasks include painting a fence, dressing a child, filling out a form buying a pair of shoes, making an airline reservation,

borrowing a library book, taking a driving test, weighing a patient, sorting letters, taking a hotel reservation, writing a cheque, finding a street destination and helping someone across a road. In other words, by "task" is meant the hundred and one things people do in every day life, at work, at play, and in-between. (Long 1985, p.89 in Nunan 1999, p. 24)

An activity or action which is carried out as the result of processing or understanding language (i.e. as a response). For example, drawing a map while listening to a tape, listening to an instruction and performing a command, may be referred to as tasks. Tasks may or may not involve the production of language. A task usually requires the teacher to specify what will be regarded as successful completion of the task. The use of a variety of different kinds of tasks in language teaching is said to make language teaching more communicative. (Richards, Platt and Weber 1986, p. 289 in Nunan 1999, p. 25)

… a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused

on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right with a beginning, a middle and an end. (Nunan 1989, p. 10 in Nunan, l999 p. 25)

A goal oriented communicative activity with a specific outcome, where the emphasis is on exchanging meanings not producing specific language forms. (Willis 1996: 36)

The first definition is a non-technical, non-linguistic one. It describes things we would do every day. The others describe what the learner will do in the classroom. However, all of them seem to have one thing in common; they all imply that tasks involve communicative language use in which the user's attention is focused on meaning rather than form.
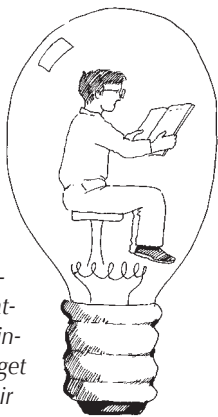
A task usually consists of more than one activity, and it is very difficult to decide where a task begins and where it ends since a task might be a sub-component of a larger task One essential difference between a

task and an exercise is that the former has a non-linguistic outcome while the latter has a linguistic one (Nunan, 1999, p. 25).

Task-based Learning (TBLT)

Task-based learning (TBLT) is an approach to the design of language courses in which a collection of tasks is the point of departure for planning and instruction rather than an ordered list of linguistic items, functions, topics or themes, vocabulary, or skills.

The danger in designing courses based on a collection of tasks is that students would become experts in performing tasks and would certainly acquire fluency but at the expense of accuracy. According to Nunan (1999), this problem can be solved by choosing tasks according to the goals of the curriculum and by following some principles of selecting, sequencing and integrating materials. A general principle is that tasks should be sequenced from reception to production; that is, listening and reading tasks should generally precede speaking and writing tasks. The former can act as models for the learner and provide them with the language and content necessary to produce language of their own. Tasks should also follow the task dependency principle *"in which each succeeding task in the instructional sequence flows out of, and is dependent on, the one that precedes it. In this way, a series of tasks in a lesson or unit of work forms a kind of pedagogical ladder, each task representing a*

rung on the ladder" (Nunan 1999, p.30). The final principle to consider is to move from "reproductive tasks" in which learners reproduce language models provided by the teacher, the textbook, or the tape, to "creative" tasks which require the learner to recombine familiar and new elements in novel ways (p. 29-30).

Willis (1996) recommends that tasks should be seen as just one component of a larger framework.This framework consists of three phases: pre-task, task cycle and language focus. The pre-task introduces the students to the topic and the task. The professor helps students recall and activate topic-related words and phrases that will be useful both during the task and outside the classroom. These words and phrases are written on the board so that the students can refer to them when performing the task. The instructor also makes sure that the students understand what the task involves, what its goals are and what outcome is required. The students read the instructions, the teacher demonstrates the task and, if possible, s/he plays a recording of fluent speakers performing the task. Next, students are given a few minutes to prepare themselves individually for the task. Once this preparation time is over, students begin the task cycle. This phase consists of three components: task, planning, and reporting. During the task stage the students perform the task, and the teacher stops teaching and just monitors and encourages the students.

Next the students prepare to report their findings to the whole class either orally or in writing. The instructor acts as the linguistic adviser and helps the students to correct their work. Finally, some groups present their reports to the class. The instructor gives feedback on content and form. The last phase in the framework, language focus, allows a closer study of some of the specific features naturally occurring in the language used during the task cycle. In this stage of the framework, the students examine and discuss features of the texts or transcripts of the recordings and practice the new words, phrases and patterns occurring in the data.

In sum, the TBL framework provides the three basic conditions for language learning: exposure, use and motivation. Students get exposure during the pre-task cycle as they recall and learn topic-related words and phrases, listen to recordings and read texts. The task cycle offers learners the chance to use whatever language they already know in order to carry out the task, and then to improve that language under teacher guidance, while planning their report of the task. Short-term motivation is provided through the use of a wide range of interesting topics, texts and task types together with the need to achieve the tasks objectives and to report findings to the class. Success in doing this can increase long-term motivation. The fourth desirable condition for learning – explicit study of language forms - is met in two phases

in the framework: the planning stage when the students strive for accuracy as they organize their reports and receive feedback from the teacher, and in the final component through consciousness-raising activities and practice of linguistic aspects which need to be reinforced (p. 40).

As a conclusion, EFL/ESL methods which use tasks as a point of departure for planning and instruction should follow some principles to select, sequence and integrate materials in order for them to promote communication and language use.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL TASKS

A group of experienced EFL instructors were asked to list the most important characteristics of successful tasks. This section presents the results of the survey, and what specialists in the field have said to support the professors' points of view. Many of the characteristics selected are closely related; therefore, it is sometimes difficult to discuss one without mentioning the others.

The task has to be motivating

Professors in general agree that motivation is the most important factor affecting success in language learning. What is motivation? According to Harmer (1991), *"Motivation is some kind of internal drive that encourages somebody to pursue a course of action. If we perceive a goal (that is, something we wish to achieve) and if that goal is sufficiently*

attractive, we will be strongly motivated to do whatever is necessary to reach that goal (p. 3)." This means that if students are highly motivated, they will succeed regardless of the method used or the circumstances in which they study.

Ur (1996) claims *"that 'motivation' on its own is rather difficult to define. It is easier and more useful to think in terms of the 'motivated learner': one who is willing or even eager to invest efforts in learning activities and to progress (p. 274)."* She adds that there are many ways to motivate learners, but one of the most important is to make the tasks and lessons interesting. This requires careful choice and planning of topics and tasks, and most of all, the teacher's ability to transmit her own motivation to the students (p. 274).

Willis (1996) mentions motivation as one of the essential conditions for effective language learning. She says that motivation is the key to success in language learning, and success and satisfaction are key factors in sustaining motivation. If students get good results, they will be more willing to continue participating in class and use the language outside the classroom. Some students have personal long-term motivation such as traveling, studying abroad or getting a better job. Other students, however, come to our classes because it is a school requirement or because parents or bosses want them to learn English. Careful selection of topics and

tasks can serve to motivate them in the short term (p. 11). Since for many students the contact with English is limited to the class time, it is also important to motivate them to continue learning outside the classroom: chatting with Internet friends, playing computer games, listening to songs and reading in English.

The task has to address the students' needs. It has to be appropriate to achieve the goals and to the proficiency level of the students, not to easy, not too difficult, but challenging

The second characteristic of successful tasks mentioned by the professors is that the task has to address the students' needs, be appropriate to achieve the goals and designed according to the proficiency level of the students, that is, not to easy, not too difficult, but challenging.

Needs-based courses emerged out of communicative approaches to language teaching. Selection of tasks, according to Long and Crooks (1993 in Richards & Rodgers, 2002) should be based on a careful analysis of the real-world needs of learners (p. 230). This view is also supported by Nunan (1999) when he says that *"Rather than fitting students to courses, courses should be designed to fit students (p. 148)."* In order to find out what the needs of a specific group of students are, a needs analysis has to be carried out. A needs analysis is *"Sets of tools, techniques, and procedures for determin-*

ing the language content and learning process for specified groups of learners (Nunan, 1999, p. 149)." Richterich (1972, Richterich and Chancerel, 1978 in Nunan, 1999) makes a distinction between two types of needs: objective (those that can be diagnosed by teachers based on analysis of personal data, language proficiency and patterns of language use) and subjective needs (the students' wants, desires, expectations, or other psychological manifestations of a lack). The latter are more difficult to diagnose and in many cases can only be stated by the students themselves. Both are important though and should be taken into consideration when designing a course. Richterich also draws a distinction between initial and ongoing needs. Initial needs analysis is carried out before a course begins, and ongoing needs analysis refers to the relatively informal analysis carried out once a course has begun. However, in most educational systems the teachers are only in a position to engage in ongoing needs analysis since they usually get information about the students when the course starts (p. 149). According to Nunan (1999) one way for teachers to get information about the students' ongoing needs is incorporating into their lessons tasks that require the students to contribute ideas about what should be learned and how it should be learned. This will provide the teacher with an instant "snapshot" of group interests and preferences (p. 151).

The task has to be meaningful to the students

Another important characteristic of tasks is that they have to be meaningful to the students. This meaningfulness principle is an important element in Communicative Language Teaching: language that is meaningful to the learner supports the learning process. Consequently, learning tasks should be selected according to how well they engage the learner in meaningful and authentic language use rather than tasks which merely promote mechanical practice of language patterns (Johnson 1982, Littlewood 1982, in Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

The task must elicit real communication, promote conversation in English. This means that there has to be an exchange of information with feedback

A third characteristic mentioned by professors is that the task must elicit real communication, and promote conversation in English. This means that there has to be an exchange of information with feedback.

Ur (1996) claims that *"Of all the language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), speaking seems intuitively the most important: people who know a language are referred to as 'speakers' of that language… (p. 120)."* She adds that classroom tasks that develop learners' ability to express themselves orally are, therefore, an important component of a language course. According to Ur, the following characteristics must be present in successful speaking tasks: a lot of

learner talk, even participation, high motivation, and an acceptable level of language use. However, these types of tasks, she adds, are difficult to design and administer. Some of the problems that teachers might encounter are inhibition, nothing to say, low or uneven participation and mother-tongue use. Some of these problems can be solved by using group work, basing the activity on easy language, making a careful choice of topic and task to stimulate interest, giving some instruction or training in discussion skills, and keeping students speaking the target language. A good topic is one to which learners can relate and talk about by using ideas from their own experience and knowledge. In general, task-centered activities are favored by teachers over topic-centered discussions because there is more talk, more even participation, more motivation and enjoyment. However, there are students who prefer topic-centered discussions such as debates because they find them interesting, and they can analyze issues more deeply. Both should be included in a balanced program (p. 120-122).

Harmer (1991) claims that when deciding how to approach the teaching and learning of English, we can divide classroom activities into two broad categories: those that give students language *input,* and those which encourage them to produce language *output*. Input by itself is not enough. We have to provide opportunities for the students to activate their knowledge and produce lan-

guage that they can select from the input they have received. Output activities allow students to rehearse language use in classroom conditions and receive feedback from teachers, peers, and themselves. (p. 40).

The task must have a purpose that goes beyond a classroom exercise

Another important characteristic mentioned by teachers, which is closely related to the previous one, is that the task must have a purpose that goes beyond a classroom exercise.

According to Harmer (1991), if a task is to be genuinely communicative and promote language use, the students should have a desire to communicate, they should have a purpose for using the language, and this purpose should be the most important part of the communication. Therefore, the students' attention should be centered on content – what is being said or written – and not on the language form that is being used (p. 49).

Willis (1996) also supports this idea. She says that learners need opportunities to communicate what they want to say and express what they feel or think. She adds that practice activities that are not meaning-focused -- activities where the aim is to practice specific forms and functions -- have been found inadequate to promote learning.

In EFL settings, students might not have the opportunity to get enough or any exposure to the target language

or opportunities to use it in real communication outside the classroom; therefore, focused instruction, that is, drawing attention to language form, is important to help the students to improve more rapidly and to continue improving. Willis (1996) recommends tasks which aim at promoting awareness of language form, making students aware of particular language features, and encouraging them to think about them. These tasks are likely to be more beneficial in the long run than form-focused activities aimed at automating production of a single item. Instructors can design consciousness-raising activities to highlight specific aspects of language that occur naturally both in the students' reading and listening texts. These exercises can give them a chance to ask about other features they notice for themselves (p.15-16). The linguistic element(s) to be taught, however, must be based on the students' needs. After the students perform the tasks, teachers have to select the grammatical and other linguistic elements that need to be taught or reinforced based on the data used in previous tasks.

The Task should preferably be for pair or group work

A good number of teachers believe that successful tasks should be preferably for pair or group work. For some years, methodologists have also recommended the use of group work in FL/SL classrooms. They claim that carefully structured interaction between students contributes to gains in FL/SL

acquisition (Long & Porter 1985, Bejarano 1987, Daughthy and Pica 1984, Johnson & Johnson 1991, Kagan 1988 in Hernández, 1994). Pedagogical arguments have been used to support this claim: group work increases the quantity and quality of student talk (Long, Adams and Castaños, 1976 in Long & Porter 1985, Bejarano 1987), individualizes instruction, promotes the acquisition of global language skills (Bejarano 1987 in Hernández 1994), creates a positive affective climate in the classroom and increases student motivation (Littlejohn 1982, Fitz-Gibon and Reay 1982 cited by Long & Porter 1985 in Hernández, 1994).

Seligson (1997) claims that *"if language is viewed as an interactive tool, then it should be taught interactively. Speaking is an active process rarely carried out in isolation, so it's a natural framework for interaction,* *i.e. talking to somebody as in real life* (p. 42).*"* He also believes that students learn by doing things for themselves, and group work provides and opportunity for them to do so. In addition, it is more motivating for students and teachers once they're used to it. Moreover, since the teacher does not have to control everything, s/he is freer to listen to more students at once and offer more individual help. On the other hand, group work is a way of treating students with respect and encouraging them to work more autonomously. They can help each other, which aids maturity and makes them less dependent on us (p. 42).

Ur (1996) mentions other advantages of group work: it fosters learner responsibility and independence and contributes to a feeling of cooperation and warmth in the class. She adds, however, that these potential advantages are not always realized because teachers are afraid to lose control of the students, there may be too much noise, the students may over-use their mother tongue, do the task badly or not at all; all their fears are well founded (p. 232). However, some of these problems
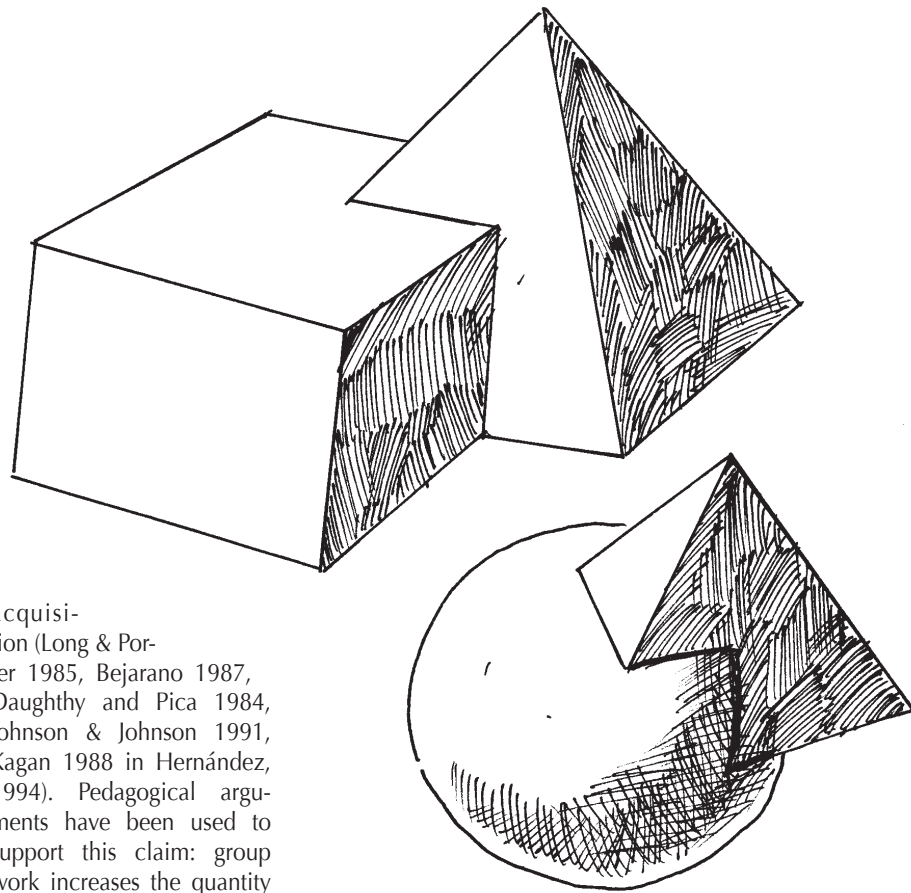
can be solved if we use Co-operative Learning (CL) techniques (Hernández 2003). Instructors should become familiar with the principles underlying CL and follow their recommendations so that group work tasks can be highly successful.

The tasks have to train students to use strategies and evaluate the effectiveness of the strategies used

Another characteristic of successful tasks that was mentioned by the teachers is that the tasks have to train students to use strategies and evaluate the effectiveness of the strategies used. Specialists in the field also support this point of view.

Although for many years people have been using learning strategies, it is not until recently that researchers have formally discovered them. They have started naming, classifying and evaluating them. According to Oxford (1990) *"learning strategies are specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations (p. 8)."* She adds that *"strategies are especially important for language learning because they are tools for active, self-directed involvement, which is essential for developing communicative competence (p.1)."*

Chamot & O'Malley (1994) agree with Oxford . They say that *"students who use strategic approaches to learning will comprehend spoken and written language more effectively, learn new information*

with greater facility, and be able to retain and use their second language better than students who do not use learning strategies (p. 58)." Allwright and Little (1990 and 1991, in Celce-Murcia, 2001) add that learning strategies enable students to become more independent, autonomous, lifelong learners (p. 362).

Oxford (in Celce-Murcia, 2001) recommends that in order for a given strategy to be helpful and useful, it must fulfill the following conditions: (a) relate well to the L2 task at hand; (b) fit the particular student's learning style preferences to one degree or another; and (c) the student must employ and link the strategy effectively and link it with other relevant strategies. However, students are not always aware of the benefit of consciously using learning strategies. It is the job of the teachers to develop students' awareness of learning strategies and to help them use a wider range of appropriate strategies (p.162).

Although everybody uses strategies in the process of learning, research studies conducted with ESL/EFL students indicate that poor language learners repeatedly use the same strategies. They are unable to recognize that these strategies are not helping them to achieve the objectives. On the other hand, good learners use more appropriate strategies for specific tasks and have a wider range of strategies from where to choose. Another important finding is that even though people have different learning styles, these can be

modified when results are not satisfactory. Explicit learning strategies instruction may help students achieve success with both language and content learning (Chamot, Dale, O'Malley, & Spanos 1993; Padron & Waxman 1988; O'Malley & Chamot 1990; Oxford 1990; Rubin, Quinn, & Enos, 1988 in Mendelsonhn 1995, p. 43).

`Chamot & O'Malley (1994) recommend a five-step procedure for strategy instruction: preparation, presentation, practice, evaluation, and expansion. In the preparation stage, the teacher develops the students' meta-cognitive awareness and self-knowledge through activities such as discussions, small group interviews, learning strategy questionnaires and individual think aloud interviews. In the presentation phase, the professor explicitly trains the students to use a particular strategy. In the practice stage, the students are given individual or group assignments, which will give them the opportunity to use and apply a strategy. In the evaluation phase, students reflect on their strategy use and assess the effectiveness in using the strategy as well as the contribution the strategy makes to their learning. Finally, students not only assess the effectiveness of strategy use but can do so by comparing one strategy with another (p. 66-67).

The texts in tasks should be authentic

Another characteristic mentioned by Costa Rican professors is the use of authentic texts. Nunan (1999)

defines authentic texts as those that have been produced in the course of genuine communication and not specially designed for language teaching purposes (p. 79-80). Authentic texts provide students with practice on listening to and reading genuine language drawn from a variety of source. Examples of authentic materials include texts, videotapes, audio recordings, mini-lectures, TV and radio broadcasts, conversations, interviews, announcements, field trips, community resources, student knowledge, web resources and visual aids (posters, maps, bulletin boards) selected mostly from those produced for native speakers of the language. Practice with these materials will help the students cope successfully with genuine communication outside the classroom (Stoller, 2004, Nunan,1999, Stryker and Leaver (1997). Willis (1996) mentions another advantage of working with authentic texts. They contain language features different from the ones we might be focusing on in that particular class, so if some students are not developmentally ready to internalize the target feature, they can benefit from other linguistic aspects included in the texts, for example, vocabulary and expression. As a result, individual students will probably be learning different language aspects.

Since teachers will very often be working with texts which are beyond the current proficiency level of the students, it is important to be skillful enough to use authentic materials in such a

way that most students can benefit from them regardless of their level of proficiency. Bernhardt (1986 in Stryker and Leaver l997) suggests replacing the idea of 'graded texts' by 'graded activities' (p. 5). In addition, when selecting the content, teachers should look for familiar topics for which students already possess the linguistic, content, and cultural background knowledge.

The Task must include a pre-task, a while-task, and a post-task

According to teachers, another characteristic of vital importance for successful

performance of tasks is that the activity must include a pre-task, a while-task, and a post-task. Although we find different terminology, methodologists generally agree that a task must include an introduction, the task itself, and a follow-up.

According to Harmer (1991) the organization of an activity and the instructions the teacher gives are of vital importance for the students to be able to perform the task satisfactorily. He says that an activity can be divided into the following parts: a *lead-in*, where the teacher introduces the topic; *instruct*, where s/he tells the students exactly what to do and demonstrates the activity; *initiate,* the students perform the task, and finally s/he organizes feedback (p. 220).

As it was mentioned before, advocates of Task-based learning also support this point of view. They believe that for a task to promote

constant learning and improvement, it should be seen as one component of a larger framework. This framework consists of three phases: pre-task, task cycle and language focus. The first two stages fulfill the essential conditions for language learning, and the last, the desirable one.

STUDENT EVALUATION OF TASKS

A research project (Hernández 2005) was carried out in an Oral Communication Course at the University of Costa Rica during the second semester of 2004. Twenty-one second-year students participated in the project. One of the objectives of the project was to identify which tasks best promoted the oral participation of the students. Several tasks were tested, and the students expressed their opinions about their effectiveness in promoting oral participation and improving oral communication skills. The following oral production tasks were evaluated by the students: oral presentations to the class, jigsaw readings, group discussions, debates, and walk around, pair-work activities.

Oral presentations were found very important by a considerable number of learners since they plan them more carefully because they know they have to face an audience. They also have the opportunity to practice simple public speaking techniques that will help them to improve their individual style of public speaking and to overcome stage fright. However, many students

think that they feel more at ease and eager to participate when they work in pairs or in small cooperative groups.

Group work tasks, such as jigsaw readings and walk-around activities, are favored by the majority of the students. The benefits are greater if the students use visual aids such as graphic organizers, charts, and illustrations to help convey meaning and to recall information. Students thought that jigsaw activities were very helpful because they learned to summarize the ideas in the readings, they learned new information and vocabulary from their classmates, and when they had doubts, teammates gave them explanations and helped them to clarify ideas. The students also felt more at ease and free to give opinions when working in small cooperative groups than when facing the whole class, so their individual oral participation increased substantially. However, some students expressed concern about classmates not giving them enough information or the correct information.

Students thought that debates and group discussions gave them the opportunity to interact with classmates and practice English in spontaneous situations; therefore, they could assess how well they could perform in the target language. In addition, they learned to express opinions and defend a point.

A walk around, pair work task called "Circulations" was evaluated by the students. They thought that this was a very dynamic and

useful activity to improve their oral production skills because they had to learn all the information and share it with their classmates, a very good way to test what they knew. Since they had to talk to only one person at a time, they felt very comfortable, and their fluency improved as the task progressed. In addition, they mentioned that they learned and had fun at the same time. As in other group work activities, some students expressed concern about the veracity and the amount of information given by classmates.

ORAL COMMUNICATION TASKS

The following cooperative learning tasks have worked successfully in oral courses taught at the University of Costa Rica. Although the main focus is oral production, all of them integrate the four language skills. They all match the characteristics mentioned by the experienced teachers who participated in the study. They also meet the conditions necessary to stimulate learning: the students get enough **exposure** to the target language through authentic readings, videos, lectures, and audio-visual aids. Work in expert groups, visual aids such as graphic organizers and illustrations, and the choice of familiar topics help to make input comprehensible, and pair and group work provide the students with greater opportunities to **use the language** since all of them participate simultaneously in the presentation of the topics. In addition, using interesting and authentic texts and ma-

terials as a point of departure for classroom activities can enhance students' **motivation**, accelerate students' acquisition of language proficiency, broaden cross-cultural knowledge, and make the language learning experience more enjoyable and fulfilling. (Stryker and Leaver, 1997, p. 5) These tasks have a purpose that goes beyond a classroom exercise. They elicit real communication and promote conversation in the target language. Both feedback on content and form is given to the students when they are working in expert groups or preparing their reports and after jigsaw presentations. In addition, linguistic aspects that emerge from the data used in the tasks are reinforced through consciousness-raising activities designed/adapted by the course instructor.

Jigsaw Presentations

The term *jigsaw* refers to activities in which students in small groups are dependent on the others in the group for the information they need in order to learn a topic or complete a task. The reading material is divided into meaningful, self-contained units, and these units are often graded according to proficiency level. First, the students work in expert groups; that is, students with the same information work together to prepare for the oral presentations in the jigsaw groups. Then the students regroup to share their knowledge with the rest of the jigsaw group members in order to get a more complete idea of the story or topic being learned. Indi-

vidual students are evaluated by the professor and/or their teammates on how well they learned and presented the information.

The instructor with the students should go over the definition and pronunciation of the new vocabulary. The students in *expert groups* do reading comprehension exercises and rehearse their oral presentations. They also prepare a short quiz to be administered after their oral presentations to evaluate how well the jigsaw members learned the information. In addition, the day of the jigsaw presentation, the students bring graphic organizers to summarize ideas or posters and/or charts to illustrate the topic-related words.

To give variety to jigsaw presentations, students can also prepare the visuals in expert groups. The day of the oral presentation, the professor brings cardboard paper, scissors, glue, and markers, and the students are given 10 to 15 minutes to prepare their posters. These are placed around the classroom, and the groups move from one visual to the next as teammates take turns explaining/teaching the information in the different charts.

The professor can evaluate the oral presentations and give feedback to one group every time the technique is used. The rest of the groups can be evaluated by teammates making use of a checklist similar to this one:

Comments:

The professor might want to administer a short quiz after the oral presentations based on all the information shared in the jigsaw groups.

The use of jigsaw reading substantially increases practice time since all the students participate simultaneously in the presentation of the topics. It improves attendance and also increases the students' responsibility to master their piece of information because their performance affects their learning and grades as well as their teammates'.

Graphic Organizers

Graphic organizers, or schematic representations of information, can help

Oral Presentations Checklist

Evaluator's name:_____

Name of Presenters			
	Points	Points	Points
The presentation was well prepared/organized			
The speaker gave enough information			
The speaker spoke fluently and clearly			
The speaker used correct pronunciation and topic-related vocabulary			
The speaker used visual aids to convey meaning			
The speaker used eye contact			
The speaker checked comprehension after the presentation			
The student was a good listener as well (asked for clarification, repetition, explanations)			
Total number of points			

Scales: 4 Excellent   3 Very good   2 Good   1 Needs Improvement

students understand and remember content information. Some examples of graphic organizers are semantic webs, spider maps, Venn diagrams, timelines, T-Lists, flow charts, story maps, and charts of various kinds. When completed, a graphic organizer becomes a summary of the content presented in the lesson or module. They can be used as a study guide or as an aid to report the students' work in speaking activities or *jigsaw* presentations.

Debates

The students receive information from a variety of sources (readings, videos, personal experiences) about the issues to be debated, for example, "Should people be allowed to smoke in public places?" "Should drugs be legalized?"

The class is organized in groups of 4. First the students work in pairs, one pair for and the other against the issue. Pair mates share the information they have on the issue and together come up with more ideas. When they are ready, they get in groups of four and the debate starts. Students are encouraged to use communication gambits appropriate for this type of discussion. The debate is always followed by a wrap-up session with the whole class.

Circulation

Every student is given a handout, a card number, and a paper clip or tape.

This number has to be clipped or taped where all the classmates can see it,
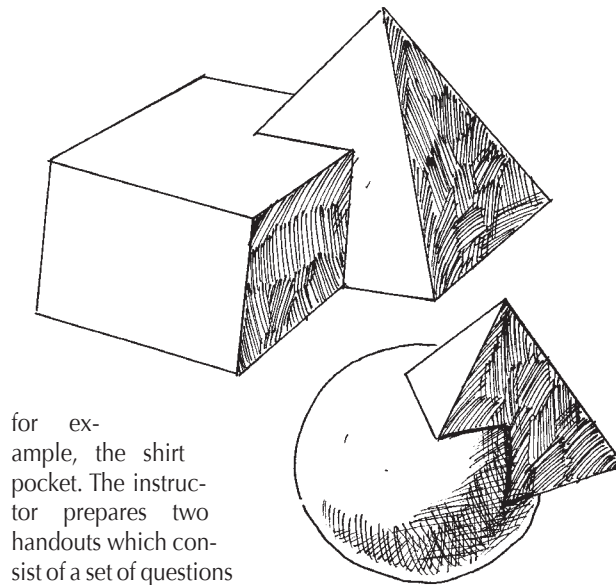
for example, the shirt pocket. The instructor prepares two handouts which consist of a set of questions related to the topic(s) being studied. There should be a question for every student in the class. Consequently, if there are 26 students in the class, each handout should have thirteen questions. The order of the numbers in each handout is different from that of the others; that is, the first handout is numbered from 1 to 13, the second from 2 to 1, the third from 3 to 2, so each student has to ask and answer all the questions.

The handouts should have card numbers of two different colors, for example, one set has red card numbers and the other has blue. The students with red card numbers interact with those who have blue ones. The questions they ask their classmates should match the number the classmates have on their shirt pocket. The handouts might look like this:

Handout 1 – Set 1

Circulation

__1__ What is marijuana?

__2__ How long does marijuana stay in the user's body?

__3__ Why do young people use marijuana?

__4__ What happens if you smoke marijuana?

__5__ What are the short-term effects of marijuana use?

Handout 1 – Set 2

Circulation

__2__ What is marijuana?

__3__ How long does marijuana stay in the user's body?

__4__ Why do young people use marijuana?

__5__ What happens if you smoke marijuana?

__1__ What are the short-term effects of marijuana use?

For this particular lesson, half of the class was given a reading about marijuana and the other half one about alcoholism. The students in expert groups worked with their readings to master the information. The day the oral activity took place, the students who read about marijuana were given a handout with questions about alcoholism, and the students who read about alcoholism, were given questions about marijuana.

After this information-sharing activity, all the students had a thorough knowledge about both topics. The instructor asked individual students to write two paragraphs about the main points they learned on both topics.

As a conclusion, language teachers believe that motivation is one of the most important factors to successfully learn a second/foreign language, and one of the best ways to increase this motivation is by carefully selecting topics and tasks, and by transmitting love and enthusiasm for the subject matter being taught. All this will encourage the students to invest time and effort in and beyond the classroom to achieve the desired results. An analysis of the students' needs is also important because professors can design activities according to the purposes for which the students are learning the language. In addition, the tasks and topics can be selected taking into account the students' likes, interests, learning strategy and style preferences, and affective needs.

In order to design a balanced program, and one that pays attention to individual differences and learning styles, teachers should select a variety of texts and task types. These tasks should elicit real communication and promote lots of learner talk. When possible, authentic materials should be used. Some of the problems professors might encounter with authentic texts and communicative tasks can be solved by providing enough comprehensible input before performance of the task, making sure the tasks are adapted to the language proficiency level of the students, choosing familiar topics, and designing well-structured group work tasks, which promote even participation, avoid inhibition, and increase learner talk. The students can receive peer and teacher feedback during performance of the task. Research findings indicate that small-group work approaches are superior to whole-class traditional methods because the students can master the material presented by the teacher better than they can when working by themselves. In FL/SL learning, the students have greater individual language practice opportunities, the quality of student talk improves as a result of the wide variety of functions and skills practiced, and students engage in more negotiation of meaning. The instructors can pay more attention to individual needs, and the students become autonomous learners. In addition, students should be trained to use a variety of learning strategies to help

them cope with text complexity.

Experienced EFL/ESL teachers and specialists in the field agree that tasks should train the students to use strategies, and strategy use should be followed by an evaluation of the effectiveness of the strategy/strategies. According to research studies (Chamot, Dale, O'Malley, & Spanos 1993; Padron & Waxman 1988; O'Malley & Chamot 1990; Oxford 1990; Rubin, Quinn, & Enos, 1988 in Mendelsonhn 1995, p. 43), good language learners have a wide range of strategies from where to choose and are able to select the appropriate one(s) for particular tasks. For this reason, teachers should train the students to use a variety of strategies and provide opportunities for students to select and apply the right ones based on specific tasks. The training has to be explicit, and after performance of the task, the students have to assess their success and compare it with the use of other strategies.

In sum, from a pedagogical point of view, variety is the key to success. Selecting appropriate topics and different task types will keep the students interested and provide for individual differences and learning styles. This will increase the students' motivation to engage in the learning process and, as a result, bring about success in their efforts to learn the language.

References

Celce-Murcia, M. 2001. *Language Learning Styles and Strategies*. In Teaching

English as a Foreign Language. Boston: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.

Chamot, A. and J. M. O'Malley. 1994. *The CALLA Handbook:*

Implementing the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach. Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.

Harmer, J. 1991. *The Practice of English Language Teaching.* London and N e w York: Longman.

Hernández Herrero, A. 2005. Content-Based Instruction in an English Oral

Communication Course at the University of Costa Rica. *Actualidades Investigativas en Educación*. Instituto de Investigación en Educación (INIE), Vol. V(2) 1-28. Universidad de Costa Rica. San José, Costa Rica.

Hernández Herrero, A. 2003. Cooperative Learning Then and Now. *Revista*

Repertorio Americano. **Nueva Época, No. 15/16, 299-316. Universidad Nacional. Heredia, Costa Rica.**

Hernández Herrero, A. 1994. *Systematizing Groupwork Activities in the*

Language Classroom. Tesis de licenciatura en Lengua Inglesa. Universidad de Costa Rica. San José, Costa Rica.

Nunan, D. 1999. *Second Language Teaching and Learning.* Boston: Heinle

& Heinle Publishers.

Oxford, R. 1990. *Language Learning Strategies: What Every Teacher*

Should Know. **Boston: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.**

Richards, J.and T. Rodgers. 2001. *Approaches and methods in*

Language Teaching. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Seligson, P. 1997. *Helping Students to Speak.* London: Richmond Publishing.

Stryker, S. and B. Leaver, Editors. (1997). *ContentBased Instruction in foreign*

language education: Models and methods. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.

Willis, J. 1996. *Language learning: creating the best environment*. In A

Framework for Task-Based Learning. Addison Wesley Longman Ltd.

Ur, P. 1996. *Learner motivation and interest*. In A Course in Language

Teaching. New York: Cambridge University Press.