

# Improving Language Acquisition Through Better Task Design

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## ABSTRACT

This paper will examine how teachers can help students more efficiently acquire language through different kinds of practice activities. A distinction will be drawn between day-to-day tasks used for teaching, and evaluative tasks used for testing.

To begin the paper will examine the nature of language acquisition as a skill. Then, it will examine three factors that contribute to effective language practice: success-orientation of tasks, the use of open-ended tasks and the use of creative repetition. Finally, it will end by presenting an example lesson plan.

## 1) The Nature of Language Skill Acquisition

Language acquisition follows a learning pattern similar to other skills. In the initial presentation and explanation of material, students learn the material and take it into short-term memory, but do not yet master or acquire it. The crucial second step in the acquisition process is the practice stage. During practice learners move what they have learned from short-term memory into long-term memory and become able to understand and produce examples of it with gradually lessening teacher support. (Ur, 1988, p. 11)

The teacher's most important duty apart from explanation of the language, is to design a set of interesting, motivational and challenging tasks for student practice. During the practice stage, it is useful for the teacher to see him or herself as a coach who sets out the goal and works with the students to achieve it. Only after sufficient training, should evaluation occur. In other words one need remember that, while testing fills a vital role in assessment and long-term planning, acquisition comes through repeated practice, not repeated testing. The next section will introduce ways to promote effective practice.

## 2) Factors That Contribute to Effective Practice

This section will review three factors that contribute to effective language practice: success-orientation of tasks, the use of open-ended tasks and the use of creative repetition.

### 2-1. Success-orientation

“Although ... correction of mistakes does contribute towards learning (on a conscious, intellectual plane), the kind of thorough, semi-intuitive absorption of material that we are aiming for in language teaching can only be achieved if, after mistakes have been eliminated, learners have plenty of experience ‘doing it right’.” (Ur, 1988, p. 12–13)

Success-orientation is a frame of mind that teachers should have and should promote in their classrooms. As Ur wrote in the above quotation, learners need to “have plenty of experience doing it right.” The first reason for this view is simply one of efficiency. Practice is most effective if it is based on successful performance. So, practice activities should be designed towards that end. The second reason for promoting a success-oriented frame of mind comes from the effect learner self-image has on acquisition. Successful task performance helps students develop a positive self-image as a language learner. If a student sees him or herself as just not being able to “get English,” then, the battle is nearly lost before it has begun. Furthermore, having a positive self-image as a language learner, leads students to having a positive image of the subject being studied. In short, if the students can succeed, they will like the way they appear to others and like English itself.

### 2-2. Open-ended Tasks

The next section will examine the difference between open-ended and close-ended tasks. To begin, an open-ended task is one which has a certain flexibility to it. An open-ended task allows for a wider variety of short or long answers and thus may be done by students at various proficiency levels. A close-ended task, on the other hand, is one which allows for little variety in student production, often having only one correct answer; an example being the multiple-choice question.

Open-ended tasks are quite advantageous for practice. Classes are often composed of students with quite different ability levels. By using open-ended tasks, weak students can be given a chance to produce something successfully, without adverse effects for high level students. This goes back to the previously mentioned point. More students will get more learning value out of successful practice at their own level, resulting in positive learner attitude and motivation overall.

Close-ended tasks are advantageous for evaluation; especially with large classes. They provide

quick, reliable feedback on learner performance. Multiple choice questions, for example, help teachers to quickly evaluate students. However, in mixed-level classes low level students are over-challenged and thus demotivated by failure, while high-level students are under-challenged and thus demotivated by the lack of need to exercise their true capabilities.

### **2-3. Creative Repetition**

The third factor in promoting fruitful practice is creative repetition. In order to acquire a new language aspect, students need to encounter it again and again. However, mere repetition can be extremely boring and demotivating. In order to balance both interest and repetition the teacher must be creative. Three keys to creative repetition are progressive difficulty of tasks, variety of tasks, and instant feedback.

Progressive difficulty simply means that the tasks should move from easy to difficult so that students have a new challenge each time they encounter the language. Unfortunately, it is often easy to mistakenly put some very difficult tasks at the beginning. For example, some texts, when introducing new vocabulary, use quite difficult close-ended quiz-like tasks to review the vocabulary. Students who can not do the beginning task give up there.

Next, variety in sequencing task types is the spice of the classroom. While a certain amount of repetition of task type allows for rapid understanding, it is often too easy to fall into a boring routine.

Finally, instant feedback is one of the most important tools to make use of in the classroom. Giving students feedback on their production while they still want it improves motivation and retention.

### **3) Example Lesson Plan**

The final section of the paper will present a set of tasks for introducing a story and practicing storytelling. The story chosen is an extremely shortened version of Jean Giono's story "The Man Who Planted Trees." which has been translated into multiple languages, including Japanese, from the original French, "L'Homme Qui Plantait des Arbres." It was also made into an Academy Award-winning short animated film in 1987. The version presented here was shortened to a length which can be sufficiently covered in a single sixty to ninety class period with even a low-intermediate level group. If the group is lower or higher than that, the story can still be done, with some changes in task-design. To begin, here is the story ...

### **The Man Who Planted Trees**

A young man was hiking in The Alps when he came to an area where all of the trees had been cut. There were no birds. There were no animals. There was nothing, only dirt and rocks. It was an ugly place. It was a terrible place. So, he wanted to leave quickly. However, he saw something that made him stop.

What did he see? In the middle of this place there was an old man with a large sack on his back and a walking stick in his hand. The young hiker watched the old man as he made a hole in the ground with the stick, took an acorn out of his sack, put it in the hole and then covered it with dirt. He did this many times.

The hiker was curious. So, he approached the old man and asked, “What are you doing?” The old man explained, “I’m planting a forest! I’ve planted over 100,000 acorns. Even if only a tenth of them grow, that will still become a forest! You see, I want to do something useful in my final years!”

Thirty years later, the hiker returned to the same area. This time there were trees! There were birds! There were animals! There was even a small stream where before there was none.

Quietly, the hiker remembered that ugly place thirty years ago. Now it was beautiful ... because the old man had cared.

The first task is a very simple macro-listening task. The students are given a set of pictures which are in random order and are asked to number them in the correct order. Please see the illustration in Appendix 1.

If students are not able to determine the order after one listening, it can be repeated, more slowly with hints if possible. As was written earlier, tasks should be success-oriented, so students will gain confidence for the the more difficult tasks ahead. During the second listening, a list of basic comprehension questions should be provided, such as: “What was the young man doing in picture one?” “What did the place look like in picture two?” “Describe what he saw in picture three.” These questions should be fairly open-ended and thus capable of being answered to varying degrees of complexity by different levels of students.

After the students understand the basic story it is time to move on to details. One successful approach for introducing detail-focused questions is not to give the students the questions in written form, but rather to orally dictate them while allowing students to work in groups to understand them. In this task, understanding what the questions are, not the precise wording of the questions is most important. This task allows lower level students to understand the questions, while providing higher level students with more of a challenge. Depending upon the level of the class, this can be a good opportunity to help students

improve their skills at picking out slurred words in spoken speech. For example, the question, “What did the old man have in his hand?” could be read, “*Whad’da olman av iniz hand?*” For lower level students, some amount of gesturing may be required, but eventually they will understand and will have succeeded in something new. After students generally understand, writing the question on the board, after a short pause, allows for instant feedback. Continuing on with another example, in this story, an interesting detail-based question to ask is, “How many acorns had the old man planted?” It is interesting because students can often hear “one hundred thousand” but have a hard time writing that out as a number. This is because, they often do not hear it as a number, but as a foreign word. So, in this case it is good to have students review both forms by having them write the answer in numeral form on paper, but say, “one hundred thousand.” A third type of detail-based task is to dictate of one or two of the most important sentences in the story. Though this is fairly close-ended, is necessary so that some students do not miss what for the teacher may seem fairly obvious.

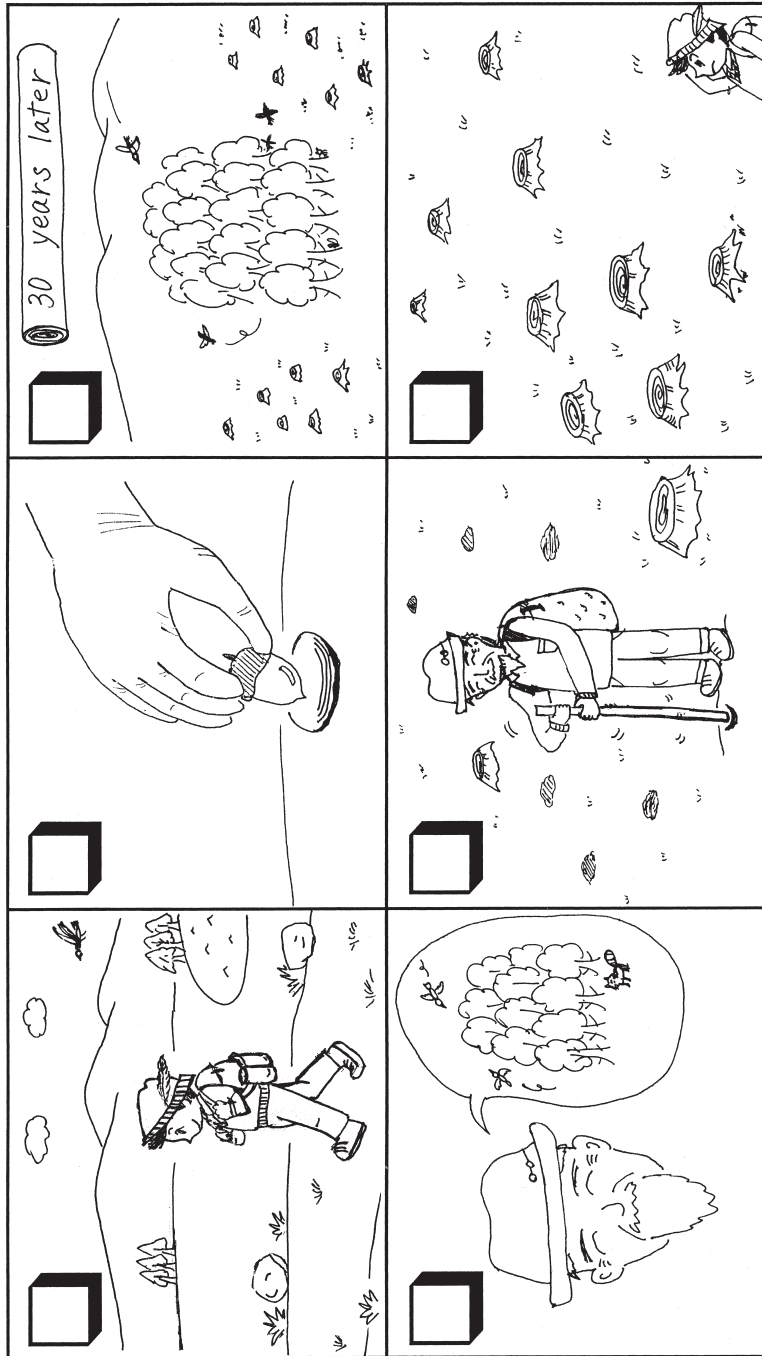
Finally, as a concluding activity, students can be asked to retell or rewrite the story, either as the storyteller or as if they were the hiker. This task provides both review and closure at the same time. Although it is a high-level task, because it is open-ended, it allows low-level students as well as high-level students to succeed. Everyone should be able to present, to varying degrees of proficiency, what they learned as their own creation. That final presentation can also then be used as an evaluative tool.

## **Conclusion**

By focusing on giving students tasks that promote extensive, successful language practice, educators can give students the chance to both learn and acquire many new things in classroom time. In many ways, evaluation is the easier part of teaching. Only by going beyond the test mentality, we can really begin to educate.

Appendix 1

Write the order in the small boxes.



## References

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