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Language learning tasks and education

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In two previous articles in [name of journal], I asked the question ‘What is a good task?’ and showed some ways in which we can answer that question. I explained, for example, how we can analyse tasks according to different ‘dimensions’ (such as whether they have ‘language specific’ or ‘wider educational’ goals’, and whether students are given roles as ‘consumers’ or as ‘producers’) I also showed how we can analyse tasks in terms of how much control they propose over content (‘what’ students will talk about) and methodology (‘how’ students will work). In this way, I showed how we can often ‘make good tasks better’ by making small, but significant changes in the way we organise classroom work. In this article, I want to take these ideas further and now look at how we can make our teaching more educational generally.

On the margins of education

For a long time, much of English language teaching has been on the margins of education. Indeed, some teachers will actually say that they are *only* responsible for teaching the language, and not for the general educational development of the student. This, however, is an illusion. Whether we are aware of it or not, students will always learn more in their language classes than just language. They will also learn their role in the classroom and (to a greater or lesser extent) pick up values and attitudes from the texts they use. They will also learn a lot about themselves as learners, about what language learning involves, and whether they should consider themselves ‘good learners’. In all likelihood, the work we ask them to do in the classroom will contribute to habits in learning that will remain with them their entire lives. As language teachers, we are perhaps not always fully aware of what our impact can be but it can be considerable. It is important then to think beyond ‘just language’ and reflect on how our teaching does - or does not - enrich the lives of the students.

Four principles

There are many different ways in which we can talk about making our teaching more educational, but here I would like to list just four principles which I have found helpful in my work as a teacher and coursebook writer. It is often a very salutary experience to look back on a series of lessons or coursebook units and see how far each of these principles have been met.

1 Make teaching coherent

Language teaching often has a very ‘bitty’ feel to it. Frequently, texts and sentences are only presented together because they exemplify the same language form. For example, students might be asked to read about buildings, animals, wealthy people, fast cars and so on because each description includes ‘comparatives and superlatives’. Language teachers might have no problem in seeing how these texts belong together, but for most students, who are more interested in *what* a text says rather than *how* it says it, this random choice of topic actually makes it more difficult to learn the language, as there is nothing coherent to make the language memorable. One solution to this is ensure that classroom tasks link together around a common topic which lasts the whole lesson or extends over a series of lessons. In this way, the content will stay with the learner longer - and with it, the language.

2 Content worth learning about

If we look at any task, we can usually easily identify the ‘learning content’ - for example, a grammar point - and the ‘carrier content’ - the topic that is used to present or ‘carry’ the language. A text about ‘Henry Smith’s day’ for example might be used to introduce the Present simple. Normally, we expect students to remember the learning content, but to forget the carrier content. This is an enormously wasted opportunity. If we make sure that **all** content is worth learning - that is, that we use topics and themes that are significant - we can enrich our teaching enormously - and make language learning more effective.

3 Use the students’ intelligence

The more we ask students to *think*, the more engaged they will be, and the deeper and long-lasting language learning will be. Many language tasks actually require extremely little thought - simple repetition, matching for meaning, pattern practice, for example. There are many ways, however, in which we can engage our students’ intelligence - or ‘intelligences’. If we focus on a coherent, significant topic, for example, we can ask students to

draw on their background knowledge to answer questions or produce their own questions which they can investigate. We can also ask them to hypothesise and speculate ('What if X happens?' 'What would you do if you were Y?'). We can involve them in planning, reviewing and evaluating their work around the topic. We can involve them producing tasks and making tests for others. The key is to find ways which require *thought* in working with language.

4 Foster autonomy

I said in an earlier article (*Etp* Issue 3) that the ultimate aim of language teaching is to develop the students' autonomy in language use - that is, that they can express or understand the language that they need or want. If we think about language teaching as education, however, we can say that an additional aim is to help students manage their own learning, and indeed their own lives. This is a very broad aim in which we can only contribute in a very small way - but we can contribute. In our teaching we can look for ways in which we can involve the students in decisions about what they are doing ("Would you like to do this in pairs or alone?" "How long shall we allow for this task?") or require them to take responsibility ("For homework, produce a plan of your revision for the test." "Look back on the units we have done. Make a list of the areas where you need more practice.").

If we apply these principles to classroom work, then we will be beginning to make our teaching more educational, more memorable and also more effective in terms of language learned. We can find out how far we are doing this by looking back on a recent series of lessons and asking ourselves four questions:

- 1 Was there a coherent topic, within each lesson and over lessons?
- 2 Did the students learn things worth learning in addition to English?
- 3 Did classroom tasks require the students to think?
- 4 Were there opportunities for students to take more control over their learning?

If the answer to each of these questions is 'yes' then I believe that we are on the road towards making language teaching more educational. We could also ask a fifth question: "How can I go further in each of these aspects?" In a future article, I will show how these principles can be applied over a series of lessons, and give more practical examples of the principles in use.

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