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# A lesson plan for an extended jigsaw task

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Much has been written in support of tasks in language classes. Coelho (1994), Crookes and Gass (1993), Long & Crookes (1992) and Nunan (1989), write of the benefits found in tasks that combine different skills. It would be appropriate for us to attempt to reproduce those benefits in our classes. Jigsaw tasks are a form of communicative language task where individuals form co-operative groups in order to exchange information. The information is then used to produce something that is larger than the original information, rather like a jigsaw puzzle. What follows is an explanation of lesson plan involving a jigsaw task. I will begin by discussing the benefits of jigsaw tasks. I will briefly explain how to set up such a task. I will then give a detailed description of one task. It is hoped that this will encourage other language teachers to be more experimental and enjoy the benefits of jigsaw tasks in their own classes.

## The benefits of jigsaw tasks

Language classrooms in Japan are slowly changing in nature. Where once teacher dominated grammar translation held sway, we now see attempts at communicative language teaching. This means there is increased emphasis on the students to use the language they are studying. Often this involves students exchanging information using a prepared dialogue, or asking each other prepared questions and filling in an answer sheet, etc. Activities like this mean that students are communicating in the target language. However, carefully controlled pair work activities may not be the most effective way. Strict pair work information exchanges usually involve restricted language that is non-negotiable and become a form of pattern practice or drilling. The information is rarely student generated and more than likely irrelevant and unmotivating. It would be better if we produced information exchanges that allow more negotiable language and more student interaction and cooperation. Jigsaw tasks are one way of doing this.

The benefits of a jigsaw task can be summarised as follows :

- 1) Increased opportunities to use the language, which leads to,
- 2) Increased opportunities for comprehensible input, so that students get more new contextually presented vocabulary,
- 3) Increased opportunities for comprehensible output (Swain 1985), which leads to
- 4) Increased confidence and motivation in speaking with, and in front of, other people, in that nothing breeds success like success,

- 5) Decreased stress, due to peer support and negotiation of meaning, in that sometimes it is easier for students to talk to each other in a foreign language while everyone else is doing so, rather than have to communicate with the teacher in front of the class (Doughty & Pica 1986),
- 6) Practice in using communication strategies such as asking for clarification, reformulating the message, checking for understanding, etc (Samuda & Rounds 1993),
- 7) Increased student awareness of their responsibilities as foreign language learners, in that they have to take part in creating the criteria for evaluation,
- 8) A balance between accuracy and fluency means less stress to be correct,
- 9) Increased use of academic skills such as critical thinking and reading, note-taking, brain storming etc,
- 10) The important impression that, after all, language lessons can actually be fun.

### **Setting up a Jigsaw task**

Jigsaw tasks differ from normal pair work activities in that students form small groups. In my experience the optimum number per group is four or five people. In this way every one has a chance to speak without too much pressure. In these original groups, students then choose to be either A's, B's, C's or D's, or whatever category. Coelho calls these sub groups the 'expert groups'.

Jigsaw tasks make use of activities among the original groups, and among the expert groups. Usually, expert groups have to manipulate information which they then have to present to the original groups. For example, experts answer comprehension questions on a text, or do paraphrasing exercises, vocabulary clozes, rewriting tasks, or create mind maps. They then regroup into their original groups. Each member has some expert knowledge which she has to present to the others. The original groups reassemble all the information to create a new super text, or solve a problem, or create a poster or a role play. In this way students enjoy the benefits mentioned earlier.

However, there are a few questions we can ask of extended jigsaw tasks.

- 1) What is the role of the teacher in all this?
- 2) How do both the teachers and the students know when they are doing it correctly or well?
- 3) Do students actually take this seriously?

I shall attempt to allay fears that such a teaching style implies lazy teaching, that neither teacher nor students have a way of knowing how well they are performing, and that students may abuse such an activity as nothing more than a joke.

1) What is the role of the teacher? The teacher quickly finds facilitative and managerial roles. While students are in small groups, the teacher can monitor the language and concepts. The teacher can decide whether, and to what degree, to correct errors. The teacher can help with

appropriate language to increase fluency. The teacher can also clarify difficult concepts and give hints on how students can explain these to other people. The teacher can give much more individual advice, which will increase individual students' confidence. In other words, the traditional concept of a teacher as the repository of knowledge and controller of the language has been usurped. Teachers get to know their students a lot quicker by getting down to the same level as them. As teachers come off the podium and down into the melee of the class, students are no longer a sea of faces, but individuals with their own interests, experiences and concerns.

There seems to be a lack of empirical evidence to support this claim, but I know my students benefit more when I talk to them as individuals, giving them help and advice as and when they need it.

2) While they are working on the tasks, how do students know that what they are doing is correct? Some of the tasks may be discrete-answer type tasks aimed at increasing accuracy, so we can easily evaluate students' performance. However, many tasks may seem to be too fluency focused. Of course direct intervention by the teacher will provide positive feedback, but it is logistically impossible to monitor and encourage all the students all the time. The next best thing is to have the students monitor themselves. We can ask the students to create a set of evaluation criteria themselves. What do they feel is appropriate and accurate and correct? Students should be encouraged to discuss this before any task. In this way they can become more aware and responsible for their language learning. The criteria they decide on as a group could become the standard for every communicative activity. This could even become a statement of standard which all the students are aware of and interact with. This idea owes a lot to concepts of empowerment where employees are encouraged to create their own quality control standards.

Furthermore, successful communication provides positive feedback. Students will know they are doing something right if they manage to transmit their intended meaning. Tonkyn (1996) points out that much interaction may arise from comity-or the desire to maintain harmony-rather than from negotiation of meaning. I feel that if students are aware of this from the outset, and if they are positively encouraged to negotiate meaning, then the quality of the interaction may be more favorable to our aims.

3) Given that jigsaw tasks imply a reduction in teacher domination, will students really take it seriously? Are they not liable to treat it as a chance to relax and chat with their friends? After all, teacher fronted classes at least provide some form of motivation, albeit coercive and extrinsic. In my experience, students are more motivated when they understand the rationale behind the task and what is expected of them. This means explaining why they have to do it (to improve various skills, to produce something that can be graded) and by involving them in the evaluation. When students set the criteria themselves they often try harder to live up to them. Furthermore, students take greater interest when they have more control over their lessons. They are very

serious about their presentations, and concentrate more than during a teacher fronted class. Students take pride over the 'product' of a jigsaw task ie. their poster, or their role-play, or their statement. After all, they use the same criteria to evaluate other groups as well as their own.

At this point we can borrow concepts from Management theory. Teachers, like good managers, should be aware of Theory Y and Theory X (McGregor 1960) which describe notions of work, or, in our case, study. Theory Y teachers probably feel that study is distasteful for most students, that students prefer to be taught and not to have to take responsibility, that students can not solve problems creatively and that they must be coerced and threatened. On the other hand, Theory X teachers feel that study can be natural, that students prefer a certain amount of control and responsibility over their classroom, that students are capable of creatively solving problems and that students can be self motivated if encouraged. These basic premises are reflected in jigsaw tasks.

#### **An Example of a Jigsaw task-'Should English entrance exams be eliminated?'**

What follows is a brief description of a jigsaw task that has been tested in the English Department of the Faculty of Education at Nagasaki University with English Majors and Minors from both the second and third year. It can take place over two lesson periods and involves two sets of homework. It includes various exercises designed to enhance listening skills, reading skills, communication strategies, speaking and presentation skills, note taking and academic writing skills. This one task appeals to current theories of language teaching in that it views language as an integration of skills. It requires the interaction of students, the negotiation of meaning, a balance of receptive and productive skills, student generated language, and provides motivating and relevant material. It also provides exercises which focus on accuracy. There are a series of sub-tasks which students complete on the way to fulfilling the requirements of the task as a whole. Each task is valid in its own right, but becomes more beneficial when they are combined in this way. Nunan (1994) argues that tasks should be dependent upon and make use of the preceding tasks in order to 'strengthen the internal coherence' of the task as a whole.

The task focuses on a discussion featured in the Readers' Forum of the Yomiuri Shinbun Saturday 26th October 1996. The forum asked : **Should English be eliminated from University Entrance Exams?** The letters in reply expressed various opinions, which serve as the input material for this jigsaw task. This is a motivating and relevant topic because all students have had experience of these controversial exams. The tasks take place as follows :

- 1) In original groups of four or five, students brain storm about this topic for five or ten minutes. This is a useful way of bringing up, or activating, and sharing vocabulary that some students might already be aware of. A brain storming session will allow the teacher to decide what needs to be taught. It will focus the students' attention on all aspects associated with this topic.

The teacher plays a monitoring role, moving from group to group, helping out with difficult vocabulary. Then, the groups call out the phrases, idioms, nouns, adjectives and verbs to the teacher who presents them on the board, with further explanation of their use, giving examples. Meanwhile the students take notes as necessary. The teacher also makes a note of these words for later use in a quiz or vocabulary test.

2) Again in original groups, the students create a semantic field or a mind-map to show the relationship between these phrases and words. It is often very helpful in academic writing to draw diagrams to show how words and ideas relate to each other. This will also encourage further peer teaching and discussion between students who have to interact and negotiate meaning. Students are encouraged to use their dictionaries to find more accurate or appropriate words and phrases, and to discuss these with each other. These activities are designed to activate and create the vocabulary to talk about this topic. In this way all the students will have a good start before they meet the text.

3) The students then get into their expert groups of A's, B's C's and D's and are given only the titles of their texts, for example: 'Turn students into creators', or, 'Tests provide goals'. Students discuss what the text will be about based on the title. This is a prediction exercise and aims to increase students' ability to predict or infer content.

The main part of each text is given after they have completed the prediction exercise. Each group has a different text, but they are all focused on the same topic. The students then perform a series of exercises designed to enhance their reading skills. These include :

- a) Skimming and scanning comprehension exercises, where students have to search for specific information,
- b) mind-mapping and listing, where students have to make a diagram of the concepts in the text and make a list of main and supporting ideas,
- c) matching conclusions, where students choose the appropriate concluding paragraph from a selection of potential conclusions.

These activities form a kind of 'back-writing' process used in academic writing classes. This is where students are given a completed text and 'go back' through the process of writing. In the comprehension questions they search for the main ideas and supporting details. Then they build a list of main ideas and supporting ideas, rather like the contents page of a book. They look for the cohesive markers that indicate the logical relationship between ideas. As they do this they create a map of the ideas showing how they are related. In this way, students are focusing on how concepts are related and how they are expressed. In my experience this is a useful technique for showing how a text is constructed. Students seem to benefit from analysing, deconstructing and rebuilding a text. They come to use the same techniques in their own writing.

- 4) Once students have deconstructed the texts, they have to make up their own comprehension

questions. This is because later they will present the ideas in these letters to other groups, and they will use these questions to ensure the other groups have understood.

5) At this stage the students begin to prepare a poster-presentation of the main points of their texts. Poster presentations involve students creating and using a poster to inform a larger group. This may be given as homework. Poster presentations are excellent chances for students to create language, express their opinions and build confidence. In my experience, students are capable of very high quality presentations, and take great care and pride over their posters. Students appreciate the chance to take control of their class and teach their classmates, and find the experience very motivating. They also enjoy being taught by their peers.

6) During the next lesson, the students reassemble into their original groups, and present summaries of their 'expert' texts to the other members, who take notes and ask questions for further clarification and information. So, for example, all the A's present their ideas while the B's, C's and D's listen. And then the presenters change and all the B's present while the A's, C's and D's listen, etc. The idea of these rotating presentations is a) to practice listening and note-taking, b) practice communication strategies, and c) practice critical thinking. Presenters use the questions they prepared to check the listeners' comprehension. Groups then discuss what they have heard and prepare a statement for the class.

7) After the presentations, students begin to write a letter expressing their thoughts and opinions on this issue using the information they have gained from their group members. The teacher emphasizes the stages (brain storming, listing, making a mind map) they practiced. They read each others' first drafts and give comments on how to improve them as a peer editing exercise. Coelho (1994) suggests the teacher also give a quiz made from the comprehension questions the students created in the previous lesson.

8) For homework, the students write a 300 word+letter.

In conclusion we can see that extended jigsaw tasks are useful and appropriate for the language classroom. I have explained how to set one up, and have given an example. Though there is no empirical data on the effects of jigsaw tasks in Japanese universities, I can say that they seem to work for me, and both I and my students are pleased with them. There are many questions we can ask, for example: Do jigsaw tasks improve overall comprehension and production? Can we compare student performance on these tasks with their performance on other, validated tests? Do the skills practiced in the classroom transfer to authentic situations outside the classroom? Are jigsaw tasks appropriate for Junior and Senior High school classes? I have also argued for their increased usage. Their benefits summarised are : 1) Increased opportunities for language use, 2) real language use and negotiation of meaning, 3) practice of receptive and productive and academic skills, 4) increased motivation, 5) increased confidence, and last but not least, a language

classroom where people can actually have fun.

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