



## **Preparing University EFL Students for Job Interviews in English: A Task-Based Approach**

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### **Abstract**

With English as the de facto *lingua franca* of the global economy, more and more companies, national and international, hold interviews for candidates in English. Gumperz and Roberts (1991) note that ‘interethnic encounters’ pose a daunting challenge for some learners; none more so than an English interview. Without the necessary cultural or linguistic knowledge, learners can potentially create negative impressions of themselves for interviewers. In an EFL situation, with limited time and large class numbers, how can instructors prepare students for such interviews? This paper reports on a task-based unit of work that was designed to activate the learner’s linguistic resources, develop an essential lexis for an interview, and introduce the learner to the cultural differences of a ‘western’ interview.

**Key Words:** task-based teaching, interview preparation, reflective assessment, student needs

### **Introduction**

Gumperz and Roberts (1991, pp. 78-79), after examining potential conflicts within ‘interethnic encounters’, stated that ‘... perceived problems which are partly due to differences in cultural knowledge and partly to differences in rhetorical conventions provide rich pickings to justify negative evaluations and refusals.’ Nowhere for a second-language learner could there be more serious ‘negative evaluations and refusals’ than in an ‘interethnic’ job interview. A learner, without situation-specific rhetorical strategies and, at least, a fundamental understanding of the cultural

differences between this particular speech event in their native and in the target language, may unwittingly create a negative image of themselves with their potential employer - a classic form of what Thomas (1983) labeled cross-cultural pragmatic failure. While this paper outlines the fundamental steps in the construction of a task-based unit, it also details a task-based approach to preparing students for a job interview in the target language. The outlined approach promotes, in the learner, an awareness of the cultural differences between the target culture and the learner's own culture. It also introduces useful rhetorical strategies by examining authentic job advertisements, job selection criteria, listening tasks, watching simulated interviews and using a task-based role play.

Research (Gumperz and Roberts, op cit; Roberts, 1998) suggests that Western and Asian (and, by tenuous extrapolation, Japanese) interview processes are fundamentally different, especially in regard to interpersonal relationships during the interview process. A commonly held Japanese assumption is that the 'western' interview is a process for the applicant to actively 'sell' his/her abilities in a very direct manner, whereas the Japanese interview is a situation for the applicant to show politeness and respect towards the interviewer and his company. Furthermore, within the Asian interview, the interviewee sees 'relatively sharp, hierarchical distinction between (their role) and the interviewer's role' (Gumperz and Roberts, p. 68; Roberts, 1998). Whether or not these assumptions of both interview processes are correct, an interethnic interview is fraught with potential rhetorical and cultural pitfalls for the incognizant learner. So, it was with some surprise to hear in an oral communication class that a small number of students were planning to apply for positions with foreign companies based not only in Japan but overseas, and that the interview process for these jobs would predominantly be in English. This seemed the perfect opportunity to develop a task-based unit on 'a target task that a specific group of learners need to be able to perform' (Ellis, 2004, pp.208-9).

### **Unit Outline**

Using Nunan's (2004) suggested steps in task-bask design as a planning template, the following sequential steps, pre-tasks and learner-roles were developed for the task-based unit (see figure 1). For the task to maintain pedagogical integrity and maximize conditions for acquisition, each step was designed as a precursor for the following step, sequentially adding vocabulary and/or activating previously learnt language.

Each step provided all, or a combination of, the following: useful vocabulary and rhetorical structures; authentic listening practice; a cultural context of the task; and preliminary practice before the introduction of the main task.

In addition to the six steps Nunan proposes for task design, an extra step, a task reflection/repetition phase was added, giving the task a spiral form, thereby allowing learners to continuously build on the language used to complete the first task and improve their performance with a repetition of the same or similar task. Although Nunan's six-steps are a comprehensive plan of a task-based unit, Murphy (2003, p. 354) suggests that 'Tasks should ... involve learners in reflecting on the way in which they carried them out, as well as on the language they used, thereby helping to develop learner autonomy.' This is supported by Skehan (1996) who believes that learners will have a better understanding of the task's objectives if the original task, or a similar task, is repeated after reflection. As in the world outside of the classroom, where repetitious linguistic events are the norm – exchanging, requesting and providing personal information are just some examples - learners, through practice and reflection, will develop their rhetorical ability in a manner more akin to how young native speakers learn their first language.

**Figure 1: Unit Outline**

Step 1: Schema building	pre-task	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- introduction of the topic – warm up questions</li> <li>- preliminary discussion – class, group or pairs – on work and career expectations</li> <li>- reading of job advertisements from international companies and schools</li> <li>- noting and recording key words and expressions</li> </ul>
Step 2: Controlled practice	pre-task	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- use model interview for pair or small group work</li> <li>- asking and answering questions requiring the use of useful words and expressions</li> <li>- exchanging formal greetings and introductions</li> </ul>
Step 3: Authentic Listening	pre-task	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- listen to several native speakers being interviewed for a job</li> <li>- read the criteria listed for this job</li> <li>- check off the job criteria mentioned by each interviewee</li> <li>- discuss the differences between a 'western' and Japanese interview – group and class</li> </ul>
Step 4: Focus on linguistic elements	pre-task	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- focus on sequence works, superlatives</li> <li>- use of intonation</li> <li>- use of adverbial clauses of time; perfect and past progressive</li> </ul>

Step 5: Provide free practice	pre-task	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- focus on using the studied rhetorical patterns and structures in the task setting</li> <li>- a small group interview task</li> <li>- practice of 'western' interview strategies (e.g. formal greeting with a handshake)</li> <li>- allow for innovation</li> </ul>
Step 6: Introduce the pedagogical task	main task	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- outline the objectives of the task – select company or applicant</li> <li>- write out the job position and selection criteria</li> <li>- select jobs and prepare for interview</li> <li>- interview potential candidates for the jobs</li> </ul>
Step 7: Task reflection / repetition	post task	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- report back to class on students selected by company</li> <li>- report on companies selected by students</li> <li>- discuss problems experienced by the students in completing the task</li> <li>- students reflect on their areas of strength or weakness</li> <li>- instructor reports observations of the task</li> <li>- repeat task with roles reversed</li> </ul>

### **The Learning Context**

This task-based unit was developed for a class of lower-intermediate to upper-intermediate students from the Department of International Studies at a former national Japanese university. Although the department does not offer a formal English program, there are a number of courses taught, mainly by native speakers, in English that provide motivated students with an English-only environment. This unit was a part of one such course – an intermediate-level Oral Communication course. The course consists of 15 90-minute lessons for one term. Each task-based unit takes approximately four lessons, depending on the complexity of the task. The task described in this paper consisted of four lessons, but, with modification, could be easily reduced or extended.

### **A Task-based Unit: Job Interviews**

#### *Pre-task*

Pre-task activities play an important role in preparing students for the main task; they provide the necessary cultural context and linguistic strategies for the learner to successfully negotiate and complete the required task. As Ellis (2004, p. 244) states, 'The purpose of the pre-task phase is to prepare students to perform the task in ways that will promote acquisition.' Therefore, it is essential that learners spend sufficient time doing pre-task activities to develop, activate and/or modify not only their current

linguistic resources but also their cultural knowledge that may be relevant to the major task.

To begin, schema building activities were given to the students to familiarize them with the topic and to build up salient vocabulary and expressions. A variety of techniques were used to do this. Students, for example, participated in pairs, small groups and class discussions where they worked collaboratively asking questions about 'ideal jobs', listing job selection criteria, and job types. During this time, new vocabulary and expressions raised by students were listed on the blackboard for latter discussion and, if applicable, practiced in groups. Alongside this, students constructed their own list of useful expressions and vocabulary.

To set the task in a real-world situation, a variety of advertisements (mainly for teaching positions and work related with the travel industry), taken from different international newspapers and magazines, were copied and then distributed among the learners. Learners were asked to read each job's advertisement and the downloaded position description and then make a note of essential criteria. This was then shared with the class and added to the class vocabulary list.

Following the vocabulary activation stage, two-short tasks were presented to the learners. The first was an 'authentic' listening task. It must be noted that the term 'authentic' here is hybrid and refers to native speakers role-playing an interview rather than an actual interview due to the nature of an interview and the issue of privacy. Notwithstanding this, the role-play allowed the learners to listen to native speakers asking and answering questions about a teaching position at a university, and it allowed them to compare their in-class generated vocabulary list with the dialogue. Learners were asked, first individually then in small groups, to listen for and check off any of the vocabulary or expressions listed in the previous lesson. From the checked off expressions and vocabulary, the learners created short dialogues and practiced them in pairs, and later, held free conversations in small groups. Many learners noted during the listening task and through their own practice that certain grammatical forms regularly appeared; for example, the past progressive tense and the use of adverbial clauses. The learners realized they needed to tell the 'interviewer' what they were doing at a specific time in the past – *'While I was in Japan, I was working at Sony. When I was at university, I was member of the soccer club.'* In pairs and groups, students created and asked questions focusing on these forms.

One benefit of pre-task work is that the learners generated a substantial amount of the required grammatical forms. As a result of learners participating in language activation tasks, student generated forms were a main part of the grammar input in the unit. This is in contrast to a more traditional PPP (present, practice and produce) task activity where much of the grammar and forms have been pre-selected by the instructor or set by a text. Instead, in a TBL unit, the necessary grammatical patterns are holistically ‘seeded’ (Ellis, 2004) in the structure of the pre-tasks, thereby, maintaining the integrity of a ‘task-based teaching’ exercise, as defined by Ellis.

#### *Main task*

The role of the main task, according to Murphy (2003), is to ‘channel attention towards the desired pedagogic outcome.’ In this exercise, the desired pedagogic outcomes were the activation of the learner’s linguistic resources, practice of the linguistic forms inherent in an interview, and to interact in an interview using a different cultural paradigm. To achieve these outcomes, an ‘unfocused’ (Ellis, 2007) role-play was designed that centered on the learners negotiating meaning rather than focusing on form, and that allowed the learners to comprehend, manipulate, produce and interact in the target language (Nunan, 2004).

The class of twenty students was divided into two groups: 5 interviewers and 15 interviewees. The interviewers and the interviewees were then separated so that each group could work on their roles in the task. The instructor clearly explained to each group their role and the expected outcome of the role-play. For the interviewers, their expected outcome was to select the best job applicant for their ‘company.’ For the interviewees, they had to choose their best three companies and then be interviewed for those positions. The successful outcome for an interviewee was selection for one, or possibly more, of the advertised positions. As there were only five companies, learners were aware before the role-play began that not all interviewees would be selected. Therefore, an element of competition, something akin to a real-world situation, was added to the role-play.

Before the next class, each of the interviewers, working alongside the instructor and using a standard template - developed from actual job advertisements cited during the pre-task - wrote job advertisements for their company. As the original idea for this task derived from students in the class preparing for interviews with international companies, similar companies, positions and criteria for employment were written and

then combined to create a job opening pamphlet that was distributed to the 'interviewees' before the next class. Each interviewee was responsible, before next class, to read the openings, select the three positions they were interested in and prepare for each interview. Interviewees were instructed not to embellish their academic records, TOEIC or TOEFL scores, or their employment record; they were to approach this interview as if they were recently graduated students.

The role-play was held in a large room, separated into five areas for each interviewer. In front of each interviewer's desk, there were three chairs. Each interviewer had the choice to interview each applicant individually, in a pair, or a small group of three. It is acknowledged that this arrangement may not authentically reflect how an interview would be held outside the classroom, but due to time constraints it was deemed an unavoidable condition of the role-play. One class period of 90 minutes was used for the interviews. The aim of this class was for all applicants to be interviewed by the companies that they had selected. Although the interview process was not prescribed beforehand, most interviewers established an interview pattern along the lines of the pre-task listening activity. First, they are asked general questions about the interviewee – educational background, work experience, English ability – then, more direct questions relating to the specific job – teaching experience, human relations, and 'What if...?', 'How would you ...?' questions. Finally, most interviewers asked each applicant to explain why they thought they would be the best candidates for the job.

At the completion of each interview, the interviewer made notes about each candidate for future reference when selecting their applicant. Interviewees, as well, took notes about each company and the position advertised. All students, after a short period for consideration, then listed the company/applicant they had selected and the reasons why. This information was then presented to the learners at the beginning of the next class where it was used as a resource for a post-task discussion of the role-play.

#### *Post-task*

The role of the post-task phase is to allow learners time to reflect upon, not only the procedural aspects of the task and its outcomes, but, more importantly, 'those forms that proved problematic to the learners when they performed the task' (Ellis, 2004, p. 258). As Murphy (2005) suggests, this is one way to assist learners to be more

cognizant of their communicative strengths and weaknesses. Through reflection, and repetition of the task, learners can review those areas that they deem to be weak or in need of further attention, thereby promoting learner autonomy.

To begin the reflection process, the results of the interviews were announced to the class. The interviewer for each company then took turns to explain why they chose their successful applicant. Most successful applicants were chosen not only for their English ability but also their ability to clearly explain why they thought they would be good for the position advertised, or, as many students commented, their ability to ‘sell themselves.’ From this discussion many students realized that they needed to be more outgoing during their interview, and they needed to be able to give longer, more informative answers, thereby showing the interviewer their ability to converse freely and communicatively in English.

The second and main part of the reflection process was a written report on the task. This report was divided into two sections: an assessment of their performance during the task and an assessment of the pre-task activities and the main task itself. In the first section, learners assessed their performance as suggested by Ellis (2004, p. 259) - ‘...to ask students to reflect on and evaluate their own performance of the task. ... to comment on which aspect of language use (fluency, complexity, or accuracy) they gave primacy to and why, how they dealt with communication problems, both their own and others, and even what language they learned from the task.’ The aim of this reflective task is for the learner to become more aware, autonomous, and active with their learning. From this feedback and from notes made by the instructor while learners were doing the main task, a list of misused forms, common grammatical mistakes and essential vocabulary was created and discussed in class.

The second part of this report was feedback for the instructor on how the unit, as a whole, was viewed by the student. This feedback was then used to modify areas of the pre-task and to make changes to the procedural elements of the main task. Learner-based feedback on the task is essential for the instructor to improve not only the way tasks are introduced to learners but also to find those areas that learners find more relevant and useful than others.

## **Discussion**

The original idea of this task-based unit was to give learners the linguistic resources and opportunity to practice a ‘western-styled’ interview in an authentic situation, at



least in so far as that is logistically possible in an EFL context. Learners, through pre-task vocabulary and form developing activities, had the opportunity to utilize not only their pre-existing grammatical structures and language but also to use this ‘new’ language. The pre-task activities were designed to provide as many opportunities as possible for the learners to be exposed to new language from authentic texts rather than the instructor providing this prescriptively. With this new language, their pre-existing linguistic knowledge, and awareness of the cultural differences between western and Japanese interview processes, learners were deemed to be sufficiently prepared to complete the main task. Therefore, success for this task would be three-fold: one, learners would show they had sufficient linguistic resources to manipulate and fluently use English in an accurate manner to create a favorable impression on the interviewer; two, learners would display relevant context-specific cultural knowledge during their exchanges; three, learners would feel that they had extensive unplanned communication with a variety of ‘interviewers.’

### **Areas of Focus**

#### ***a. vocabulary***

The written feedback from learners clearly supports Murphy’s statement (2003, p. 358) that ‘the influence of learners on the task can jeopardize the task designer’s goals.’ Even after allowing for extensive time during the pre-task phase to develop and practice vocabulary and forms, many learners could not utilize the new language successfully, and resorted to their pre-unit language resources. Reflecting on the task, many students noted that they lacked ‘*special term about jobs*’, or remarked ‘*my vocabulary is lacking*.’ The following are some of the more pertinent learner reflections.

- *we need more words; special term about jobs and more examples; maybe your demonstration. I didn’t know how to continue the interviews*
- *It is difficult for me to find words for my opinion*
- *Usually I do not use words that special for the job, so I recognized that my vocabulary is lacking.*
- *In Japan we end a interview with special sentences, but I do not know how to end English interview*

Significantly, one learner remarked upon a major difference between the interview process used in the main task and in a typical Japanese interview. The learner

remarked that, in Japanese, there are ‘*special sentences*’ – formulaic expressions – that are used by all interviewees when thanking and leaving an interview. Although the learner is a proficient English speaker, she did not know what these ‘formulaic expressions’ were in English. As a result, she felt she lacked ‘accuracy’ in the manner that she ended the interview. Clearly, as Murphy (2003) believes, no matter how much planning goes into a lesson/unit of work, into activities to activate learnt language, or into pre-tasks to expose learners to new language, there will always be learners whose language resources are not sufficiently developed to complete the task, and/or there will always be vocabulary and forms absent from the presented body. By using a post-task reflection activity, those forms, vocabulary, or any other problems can, collectively, be discussed and studied by the learners.

***b. consciousness-raising***

In regard to the consciousness-raising objective of this unit, the overall impression from students was that the task was successful in showing and giving them a chance to have an interview in English. As the comments from the learners clearly show, most, if not all, learners realized the difference between the two interview types, and felt that the task was a valuable exercise in preparing them for a future interview in English. Learners remarked on some of the differences they found during the interviews: ‘*Japanese interview is question and answer style*’, ‘*Japanese interview always tend to be passive one*’, and ‘*The biggest difference was that job seekers had many opportunities to ask questions.*’ From the feedback, most learners believe that the ‘western’ interview provides more opportunity for the interviewee to ask questions about the position, conditions and the company, questions they thought would not be asked during a similar Japanese interview.

- *I think that Japanese interview is question and answer style. This time I had to sell by myself. That is the most different point. I think that foreigners are good at telling about themselves and something to know, but Japanese people are poor at explaining our opinion.*
- *In Japanese interview, we should use honorific words to show the politeness and it is very difficult. Though in English, we do not have to take care about honorific words. So I thought it was the good point of the interview in English.*

- *I guess that we must try to be polite, modest and obedient in Japanese job interview, but non-Japanese style is different. We must try to sell ourselves. This is the biggest different that I found.*
- *Japanese interview always tend to be a passive one.*
- *Through the interviews, I noticed that the way of having an interview is really different from Japanese style. The biggest difference was that job seekers had many opportunities to ask questions.*

Nevertheless, some learners' reflections show a degree of generalization and, possibly, cultural naivety that, if not corrected, would potentially cause what this unit was intended to prevent: 'negative evaluations and refusals' stemming from an 'interethnic encounter.' Although the differences between the two sets of interviews were clearly explained, discussed and viewed, it is clear that some learners have made generalizations that are clearly not the case. For example, '*Though in English, we do not have to take care about honorific words*' and '*I guess that we must try to be polite, modest and obedient in Japanese job interview, but non-Japanese style is different.*' Clearly, the learners need to be made aware that, although English does not have the same universally used set of politeness structures that Japanese has, there are forms that are just as equally polite and formal. For learners to avoid any potential 'negative evaluation' they should be conscious that the context of a 'western' interview, like the context of a Japanese interview, is a situation where politeness is recognized as a positive factor. Examples of this would be showing gratitude to the interviewer: 'I would like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to come and talk to you today' or 'Thank you for giving me the time to come and discuss the position.'

Again, the usefulness and necessity of having students reflect upon the tasks is clearly demonstrated in this situation. Without students providing some feedback about their performance and, in the case of this cultural conscious-raising task, their understanding of the cultural paradigms they are using, then the instructor is left without the necessary knowledge to correct and change those areas of the task that the learners did not perform well in, or misunderstood.

**c. communicative chance**

A final objective of this role-play was to give learners an opportunity to develop their fluency in an interview situation, where they could activate their language resources and interact in an unplanned communicative situation. As previously discussed, there were areas in this interaction that some learners found difficult, mainly due to their perceived lack of vocabulary. Nevertheless, a majority of students commented that the length and amount of interaction exceeded other methods of practice they had so far experienced in their studies. Others commented that, although the task was difficult and challenging, it gave them a valuable opportunity to practice for an interview.

- *The interesting point about this practice was that we could get much more opportunity than before*
- *It was enjoyable activity because I could experience Western style of having an interview, and could find out how to ask questions in job interview.*
- *It was just like a real interview, so i really enjoyed.*
- *I could have high-quality communication with others in English.*
- *It was a really exciting game, actually, now I try to be ready to do the job hunting.*
- *In this practice, explaining my way of thinking well is really difficult, but that is what I'm interested in.*
- *It was difficult for me that to give them my answer soon. Interviewer gave me unexpected questions, so I took long time to collect my thoughts.*

The feedback and observations made by the instructor suggest that an unfocused task-based approach to developing communicative ability in this particular speech event, an interview, is effective. Learners had more opportunity to focus on fluency and complexity compared to more prescriptive and restrictive communicative practices. Yet, as with all forms of communicative language practices, improvements can be made to the structure and the implementation of the task to improve learners' interaction.

**Task Assessment**

Using Ellis's (2004, p. 8) assessment of task success - 'Ultimately the assessment of task performance must lie in whether learners manifest the kind of language use

believed to promote language learning' – the objectives of the task were achieved. During the task, learners activated their pre-unit linguistic knowledge, while utilizing the new language developed during pre-task activities. Furthermore, they showed their ability to interact and communicate in a different cultural paradigm. Nevertheless, for some students, a lack of content-specific vocabulary, or an over-generalization of the cultural norms of the interview process, impeded their task performance.

Some researchers (Swan, 2005) have questioned TBL's ability, compared to more traditional grammar-focused courses, to provide linguistically rich material for learners. The findings from this unit could be interpreted to concur with Swan's concern: the learners did not have sufficient vocabulary to successfully complete the task due to the inherent design of task-based instruction. However, Oxford (2006, p. 10) suggests a different explanation: '... individuals have a limited capacity for attention ... so when a task is more cognitively demanding, attention is diverted from formal linguistic features – the basis of accuracy - to dealing with these cognitive requirements.' Comments from the learners and the instructor's observations support this explanation. Due to the complexity and intensity of the task, learners 'diverted' their linguistic resources from the language studied during the pre-task stage and reverted back to pre-unit learnt language. Because the task required learners to react in real time to a dynamic conversation that consisted of a series of unrehearsed questions, the focus of attention for most learners was processing the input, as promptly as possible, for meaning and a possible response. As a result, some learners found it difficult to locate the correct form or expression during the task, and instead, relied on expressions and forms they could produce without over utilizing their already stressed linguistic cognitive functions.

Furthermore, considering the extensive class work done during the pre-task phase, involving reading authentic texts, watching an example of the main task, discussions on the topic and a variety of forms of practice, any claim that the task might be perceived as linguistically poor is probably not fair or valid. Communicative events are dynamic; the language that will be used during an event cannot be predicted. If it could, then the job of teaching English would become far easier. The aim of the pre-task stage of task-based learning unit is to develop the necessary language and to activate previously learnt language for use in the main task. If the activities carried

out during the pre-task are extensive and intensive, then learners can be exposed to a linguistically rich lexis.

### **Teaching Implications**

Reflecting on the interaction of the learners with the task, it is clear that some areas could be modified and/or extended to provide learners with more intercultural pragmatic awareness and to lessen the cognitive overload some learners experienced. One area was the activation of the pre-task generated lexis. To improve the activation rate of the generated lexis, repeating the main task over the length of the course may lead the learners to become more familiar with the interview dialogue, thereby, lessening the demands placed on the learner to respond immediately using pragmatic appropriate language. With rhetorical experience comes the rhetorical knowledge of what to expect during a speech event.

To increase the learners' socio-cultural knowledge of a 'western' interview, the instructor could possibly role play an interview -a suggestion made by one student in their reflection on the task - with another native speaker. Learners could then ask and/or answer questions about the role play. The ensuing discussion would allow the learners to ask questions to each native speaker about why they reacted or answered a question in the way they did. Such discussions may lessen the anxiety some students have towards such linguistically challenging tasks while also giving them essential socio-cultural background knowledge necessary to complete the task.

Yet, as Kumaravadivelu (1991, p. 106) succinctly states, 'mismatches between teacher intention and learner interpretation may be inevitable, but *they need not be totally negative*' (author's emphasis). Because a few learners found the task challenging and, in some cases, could not perform the task in the planned manner, it is suggested that the class as a whole benefited; their difficulties prompted class discussions and revision of key lexis that was practiced when the task was repeated. Instead of immediately repeating the task and experiencing similar difficulties, the discussed problems, instead, became valuable learning points that helped the learner to focus on better communicative accuracy, fluency and complexity during the repeated task.

Instructors should not be discouraged if the interaction between the learner and the task does not go as planned. The often-stated adage 'We learn from our mistakes' should be kept in the forefront of all instructors' minds when observing tasks and

learners interacting in unintended ways. If learners are asked to reflect on such a task, then it is possible that a key teaching or planning point may appear that will enhance not only the learner's experience and promote the learner to be more autonomous with their learning, but also improve the instructor's ability to create a more effective unit. This knowledge, acquired from unforeseen events, can be beneficial for both the learner and the instructor.

### **Conclusion**

To prepare learners for interviews in English, the task-based approach outlined herein can be an effective way to provide learners, in an EFL environment, the chance to experience a 'western' style interview process. If a variety of schema building activities are used and recycled during the pre-task stage, students can develop their fluency and accuracy. Through class discussions and reading of authentic materials students can be made aware of the cultural differences between the two interview processes. Although some learners had difficulty with the task, it is suggested that, if instructors want to provide their learners with the best possible chance for them to practice their English ability and obtain a degree of cultural insight into the pragmatics of a 'western' interview, then units such as this one are one possible solution. In comparison to a prescriptive approach, where learners practice only the language that has been presented by teacher or found in a textbook, a task-based approach allows the learners to process and react to language in an unscripted natural way that more commonly reflects what happens in a real communicative event.

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## **Personal Authenticity through Authentic Materials, Authentic Tasks, and Negotiation**

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### **Abstract**

In this article, I examine the concept of personal authenticity (van Lier, 1996), using student diary entries collected during an English for academic and professional purposes course with a negotiated syllabus. Signs of personal authenticity – a concept related to autonomy - are traced in the entries. These signs suggest that personal authenticity emerged because the students were able to negotiate many aspects of their learning. In addition, open-ended tasks that carried real life transfer value enhanced the likelihood of personal authenticity. What was also important from the point of view of personal authenticity was the use of materials that were relevant to the students' real life needs. As these findings are context-specific and stem from a localized approach, further research in Asian and other non-European cultural contexts is needed on the rise of personal authenticity through the use of authentic materials, authentic tasks, and negotiation.

**Key words:** personal authenticity, authentic tasks, negotiation, take up of opportunity

### **Introduction**

In this article, I examine the concept of personal authenticity (van Lier, 1996), using student diary entries collected during an English for academic and professional purposes course with a negotiated syllabus. Signs of personal authenticity are traced in the entries. These signs suggest that the use of authentic materials, authentic tasks, and negotiation helped students create personal authenticity in my context.

I first discuss the concept of personal authenticity and the context of this study as well as the data collection process. In the section that follows, I analyze signs of

personal authenticity with the help of the concepts of negotiation, authentic tasks and authentic materials. The relevance of personal authenticity and these concepts is the focus of the discussion.

### *Personal authenticity*

Although the concept of personal authenticity (personal relevance) has been discussed in the literature on learner-centred pedagogy to an extent in the past (e.g., van Lier, 1996; Williams & Burden, 1997), it has remained somewhat intangible, under-researched and overlooked, unlike the concept of autonomy to which it is linked. For example, Wenden (2002), in her overview on learner development and learner-centred approaches, does not mention personal authenticity explicitly, although personal authenticity and learner centredness are, at least intuitively, intertwined.

To understand what personal authenticity entails, a brief look into the concept of authenticity is needed. Authenticity is often perceived from the point of view of texts: the use of authentic language data is often considered one of the keys to learning a foreign language. However, the concept of authenticity covers a wider sphere. Widdowson writes

Authenticity (...) depends on a congruence of the language producer's intentions and language receiver's interpretation, this congruence being effected through a shared knowledge of conventions. (1979, p. 166)

Widdowson clearly extends the concept: the main focus is no longer on a text that is 'genuine' or 'unaltered' but on the interpretation of it. Over the years, the concept of authenticity has been elaborated further. For example, it has been suggested that materials do not have to be authentic, but a learner's reaction to them should be (Rudby, 2003, p. 45). And in task-based instruction, a task is understood to have 'a relationship with real worlds activities' (Lyster, 2007, p. 74). One of the ways of considering authenticity is with the help of personal authenticity.

Personal authenticity has to do with being able to do things worth doing, in a manner that suits the learner (Lehtonen, 2000). Whatever the learner does should take place in a meaningful setting. What is meaningful might depend on, for example, the learner's background, on the learner's future motivations or current needs. According to van Lier,

[i]n personal authenticity all the elements of awareness, autonomy, and authenticity come together. Authentic persons know what they

are doing, and attend in relaxed or focused ways, in accordance with the demands of the situation. Authentic persons are also autonomous, in the sense of feeling responsible for their own actions, and able to deal with choices. Finally, authentic persons validate (authenticate) learning opportunities as they occur, create their own learning opportunities when the circumstances allow, and need no coaxing to take learning action. (Van Lier, 1996, pp. 143-144)

As shown in this quote, personal authenticity is linked to autonomy. Autonomy can be defined as 'the capacity to take control over one's own learning' (Benson, 2001, p. 2). However, personal authenticity refers to the learner's 'commitment to and genuine interest in the activity in hand' (van Lier, 1996, p.143) and to 'the sources for the motivation to engage in learning activities' (ibid.). Schwienhorst (2003, p. 168) writes about three learner autonomy principles, one of which is '[a] learner who experiments with language and participates in the learning environment.' This definition is close to van Lier's views on personal authenticity. It is clear that the relationship between authenticity, autonomy and awareness is tricky and that they feed into one another. For example, it is likely that an autonomous learner, aware of her/his learning and able to take control over the learning situation, finds it easier to discover personal authenticity than a learner without these qualities. In this article, I use personal authenticity to refer to the commitment or interest created in the learner based on 1) how relevant the learning activity (tasks, materials, negotiation) is, 2) how useful the learner find the activity and 3) how the activity is linked to what needs to be mastered out of class.

We can postulate that each student finds personal authenticity in different ways, as Williams and Burden (1997, p. 164) claim when discussing the use of learning strategies. As personal authenticity varies from one individual to another, it proves a challenge to anyone intending to do research on it systematically. Despite the challenge, research into personal authenticity is needed, because discovering the types of conditions, for example, tasks and materials, that seem conducive to achieving

personal authenticity in many individual learners would benefit all teachers with a group of individual learners to teach as individually tailor-made learning is sometimes difficult to arrange and as some overarching parameters are likely to exist at least in a teaching context where learners share a similar background. A teacher ought to provide each learner with opportunities to learn in different ways and to find his or her own personal authenticity, but a teacher is unable to do so unless some type of general condition parameters having to do with the teaching situation are set up. These types of condition parameters can be unveiled by listening to individual voices and by establishing what they have in common.

### **Research questions**

My aim is to investigate what in a teaching situation helps students find personal authenticity and what they have in common in the field of personal authenticity. What trends can be noticed in students' realizations of personal authenticity that would help a teacher, faced with the task of providing opportunities to a group consisting of individuals? Although these questions have a local nature, I hope the findings will encourage other practitioners carry out similar experiments, as it is possible that the educational system, for example, may play a role in the adoption of ideas connected with personal authenticity and autonomy (e.g. Sert, 2006).

### **The setting**

The Marketing English course, equivalent to three European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) credits, was, at the time this research was carried out, part of the study requirements for Master's level students of Food Marketing at the University of Helsinki, Finland. Before the course, most students had taken ten years of English at school and had gained the equivalent of 4.5 ECTS credits in reading and oral skills, either by passing tests or by taking courses at the University. All the students had been expected to read hundreds of pages of required reading in English and many had used English in international contacts. Despite the seemingly similar backgrounds, the students' skills ranged from level B1 to C1 according to the European Framework of Reference global scale (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 24). B1 stands for a lower level independent user who 'can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc.' (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 24), and it is equivalent to the minimum score of 457 TOEFL PBT

Total (TOEFL, 2005). C1, on the other hand, is the level of a lower level proficient user who 'can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognize implicit meanings' (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 24). C1 is equivalent to the minimum score of 560 TOEFL PBT Total (TOEFL, 2005). All in all, 16 students took the course and earned the credits. The students were, on the whole, positively attuned to taking the course.

### **Interconnected tasks**

At the beginning of the course, I negotiated the course aims, contents, materials and evaluation with the students, using the know-how gained in previous courses. In addition, the Department of Food Marketing and I had carried out negotiations in the months before the course started. The negotiation process yielded for example:

#### Tasks that involved individual work

- Writing at least 4 journal entries, reflecting on one's own experiences of using /learning English in-class and out-of-class (I language-edited these entries, if the student so wished)
- 4 hours worth of language-related work of free choice, details negotiated with me (many students chose to write their CVs)

#### Tasks that involved group/pair work

- Choosing an academic article from a selection provided by the department
- Process-writing a summary based on the article and sending it to the joint mailing list (before sending it off, the student had rewritten the summary twice)
- Being in charge of running a meeting on the topic discussed in the article and activating the rest of the students
- Collecting important general academic and subject-specific vocabulary or phrases from the article, giving the list to the rest of the group and creating a test based on the collection
- Participating in the evaluation meeting with the department representative

Some of the tasks had a clear focus on language aspects (form), others on communication (function). In addition, the tasks with a focus on communication often acted as a starting point for discussions on language aspects.

### **Data collection and analysis**

The data come from student journal entries collected from 10 female and three male students (i.e. the handwritten entries of three students were excluded as only electronically submitted entries were analysed). The data were verified in an end-of-course discussion and in the individual one-on-one consultations to check the parts that were unclear. The data consist of a total of 52 entries less than half a page long. These entries served several functions. They provided the students with writing exercise they had asked for and gave them a chance to reflect on their learning and other matters concerning the course. They also provided me with invaluable feedback on the on-going course.

The following instructions were formulated in the first session, after a phase of negotiation:

In your four journal entries (about one third of a page or longer each), I would like you to reflect on what has been going on. You may write about positive experiences, new insights, learning, confusion, desperation - anything that has to do with this course and you using English here and elsewhere. In other words, you may write about your own feelings, you may write about the other course members, you may comment on the tasks and the teaching + your learning.

In addition to giving you an impetus to write in English, this task aims at making you evaluate your own language learning and use and at making me aware of what went on.

Clearly mark the weeks you write about please!

The entries show student perceptions and are therefore somewhat 'prototypical' qualitative data. They were analyzed with a focus on evidence of personal authenticity. In other words, signs of events, feelings and realizations that seemed to have made sense to the learners or that failed to do so were coded. The following categories were used in the final analysis: personal authenticity and 1) negotiation, 2) authentic tasks, and 3) authentic materials. These categories emerged after a lengthy reading and re-reading process. In the analysis, the materials were coded three times. The results of the analysis were shown to a group of peers to discuss and give feedback.

### **Signs of personal authenticity in the data**

The verbatim entries illustrated that learner differences were evident in the extent and depth of reflection. One end of the continuum can be characterized with entries by a student who merely listed what was done in class, the other end with entries by a student who was analytic in her planning, doing and evaluating. The following focuses on what the students wrote about negotiation, materials and tasks from the point of view of personal authenticity.

### ***Negotiation and personal authenticity***

The data show three different types of what the students perceived as negotiation: beginning-of-the-course negotiation, where the course tasks and goals were set up; negotiation with the department representative, where the main focus was on the integration of the course to the content teaching of the department; and negotiation of tasks in groups, where students had to make sense of what the task entailed and where students tended to subdivide the task.

As stated earlier, the course started with a session where the course syllabus was negotiated. Evaluation of this beginning-of-the-course negotiation is evident here:

I think it was a very good idea that we discussed the goals and contents of the course together on the first day, that we didn't just get set list of tasks from the teacher. This could well be done on other courses as well in order to get students to be genuinely interested in what they do during different courses. *Female student 1*

Being able to influence what takes place on a course seems to have the potential of increasing active engagement, and thus personal authenticity.

Students wrote positive comments about the visit of the department representative, which in a wide sense can be interpreted as negotiating the content of future courses – an important factor for the teacher. The following is an example of the importance of negotiating issues related to the English course and the students' studies in general:

It was a very good idea to invite [the department representative] to come and discuss matters concerning our department and the Marketing English course. Many new things came up which I think was very useful to all of us. Some of the things we talked about didn't even have anything to do with the English language itself. *Female student 7*

The relatively open-ended tasks encouraged the students to approaches where they could transform one task description to a task of their own or, as in the following, to a successful group task through negotiation:

Our meeting! Our Article was quit boring, because it handles very basic marketing issues and is very theoretical texts. So we X, Y and me decided to keep different kind of meeting and not to bore other with our dry article. And I had noticed that you remember things much better if you can participate and think things yourself. We decided to found a bakery company "Bun Bakery". We came up that we have a marketing problem and other can help us solve it. It was time to keep our meeting. At first I was nervous, like always. But after all, I thing it went quit well. *Female student 5*

The localized approach that values the know-how of all members in the learning process (see Kumaravadivelu, 2001 and 2003 for the concept of particularity), possible because of the expertise and experience of all the participants, seems to have offered the students on the course a sense of responsibility and ownership. Crabbe (2003) writes about learning opportunities that learners encounter and sometimes fail to take up. It would seem that negotiation can create a learning opportunity that encourages students to take up what has been offered.

The idea of negotiation is embedded in the paradigm shift going on in the language teaching/learning literature and practices where the teacher is no longer seen as one who transfers knowledge but as one who helps students construct knowledge (e.g., Breen & Littlejohn, 2000, Smith, 2003). Negotiation has been accepted in many circles, although it is clear it was initially met with criticism, such as the lack of externally delivered, pre-course understanding of what the course should involve (e.g., Clarke, 1991). However, negotiation is likely to enhance the chances of taking responsibility during the course, thus encouraging autonomy (see Breen & Littlejohn, 2000; Smith, 2003) and, most likely, personal authenticity, as seen in the entries. This type of negotiation 'enables learners to exercise their active agency in learning', claim Breen and Littlejohn (2000, p. 20).

### **Authentic tasks and personal authenticity**

Authenticity of tasks appears mainly in comments on the meetings that were based on the articles the students read. This task simulating real life gave rise to personal authenticity and evoked these comments:

Hardest task of the presentation was the coordination of the progress and to get the class discuss on the matter we had set. I think this exercise was quite



useful for all of us and prepared us for the real life and for the real meetings.  
*Male student 1*

I find the meeting I chaired very useful for me. I am always a little nervous when I am presenting something in front of the class. And this time I had to speak in English. My plan was to read my speech direct from the paper, but I am happy I changed my mind in the last minute and decided to go this presentation though on board and speak, not read. I think everything went quite well and it was much nicer to speak, not read. I can't read when I am in real situation either. *Male student 3*

In addition, the data gave rise to comments about CV writing that most students had opted for. In these cases, the students reflect either on 'killing two birds with one stone' or on the demands of similar tasks they will face again in the future:

Any way I think it was very teaching to do that CV task. And plus it was a good coincidence that my mentor from Valio [the biggest Finnish dairy company] just asked me to do the same thing - a CV in English. It motivated me much. *Female student 2*

There were cases where the act of putting together a CV in English was seen as a mind-broadening experience, allowing the student to deep-process and develop her/his personal authenticity.

Today I worked with my CV which was one of the assignments for the last week. I think it is important to practice how to make your CV in English because many companies require that nowadays. I used my Finnish CV as a model but I still had problems. Everything else were quite easy but defining the tasks of my earlier work experience was very difficult. It is difficult in Finnish too and when you try to write things down in a proper way in English it requires an extra effort for doing so. Some of the work titles in Finnish are a little bit infinite and so are the explanations what you have done. It is very difficult to find good translations for those.

I also had to do some "research" when I was writing the part of positions of responsibility. I have been involved in a lot of things but I wasn't sure about the English equivalents so I needed to surf in the Internet for a while to find the correct translations [...] I just had to make [the culturally difficult ones] up. I'm afraid I will have same kind of problems in the future too. It is hard to find correct terms for things in English. There is not much help of dictionaries. *Female student 3*

Producing a CV was a popular task among the students, chosen by a majority as one of the optional tasks. However, CV writing posed difficulties to some, as exemplified in the following. The task seemed too abstract in the following student's current situation where there was no real need for writing a CV, thus personal authenticity is lacking.

First I'm not so used to CV even in Finnish. I have done only one or two CVs in my entire life. It was quite difficult to decide what to include in my CV. What work experience is relevant to put in CV and what isn't? What to tell about the works what I have done? What about my activities and

other interests? Should I tell something about some specific courses which I have took?

I know that it all depends on the work what I am applying for. But now in this quite early stage of experience in my working life when I don't have that much knowledge my CV would look worthless. And the main reason for my lack of decisiveness was that I didn't have any certain job to apply for.

*Female student 2*

Students, when given freedom to choose optional tasks, seem to need more guidance than given on the course where some students clearly chose tasks not relevant to them, maybe because of a lack of relevant options or lack of own initiative.

On the basis of the above, it is reasonable to claim that tasks with transfer value help students find personal authenticity and thus motivate them. The clearer or more imminent the transfer is the greater the chance of personal authenticity.

### **Authentic materials and personal authenticity**

Most of the comments about the authenticity of the materials tackle the articles that the department had given the group. The articles presented an overview of different schools of thought in marketing, but the students were not explicitly made aware of this until the representative from the department visited the class. Despite the negotiations between the teacher and the department representative to guarantee that the work in the language course would be authentic and serve both language learning and subject (marketing) learning, the use of authentic articles and tasks did not manage to help all students authenticate their learning experience. Most students felt the articles were not very demanding. Rather, they considered them either old or boring:

Our meeting was based on Leslie de Chernatonys article 2001- The Brand Management Odyssey. The article was quite old, written in 1996, so it did not give us any new information. Actually I am quite familiar with the subject because I am doing my master thesis about brand management.

*Male student 2*

There is a clear dilemma here: sometimes real life tasks are boring, but still need to be carried out – a theme that should have been brought up with the students.

What was considered interesting and worth studying were materials that allowed the students to find personal authenticity. For example, an article with information previously unknown to the students or information that allowed them to further

process their thoughts seemed to fill the demands for authenticity, as the following example indicates:

... So the summary task was a real challenge for me! [...] I had to read the text several times before I started to understand the ideas that the writer was presenting. Luckily there was x who helped me a lot in getting the point!

Summarizing a text can be tricky in my opinion. Specially then, when the text is difficult and it is hard to point out the most important things in it. And the particular text that we had consisted of various different areas that all seemed to be important on the authors view. *Female student 7*

### **Discussion and implications**

In this section, I aim to answer my research questions that were: What elements in a teaching situation can help a student find personal authenticity and what do they have in common in the field of personal authenticity? What trends can be traced in the various students' reflections?

Personal authenticity seems to have the potential of emerging when a student learns in an environment with negotiation and open-ended tasks that carry transfer value. Crabbe (2003, p. 20) suggests that the take-up of learning opportunity is influenced by personal factors such as affect, style/experience and motive. Despite these individual differences, most students in my context found different forms of negotiation and open-endedness meaningful as they allowed them to do what suited them and what supported their learning goals.

It can be argued that curricular negotiation can give rise to curricular authenticity (van Lier, 1996, pp. 145) and negotiation can help create a joint culture (Bruner, 1986, p. 127). These in turn, can help in the creation of personal authenticity through the opportunities offered that make sense and engage. According to Breen and Littlejohn (2000, pp. 19-20), negotiation gives a boost to the learner's active agency. The data give support to this claim. Breen and Littlejohn also claim that negotiation can help extend the teacher's pedagogic strategies. The negotiation that took place throughout the course this study describes, in the form of student diaries, allowed the teacher to reflect on what was going on and also created a learning opportunity for the teacher. Negotiation cannot thus be considered a one-way street: both parties can benefit from it.

It seems paramount that a link exists between the materials and tasks, and the student's present and future, and that materials are relevant (e.g. Tomlinson, 2003). When students are able to create an entity of the fragments dealing with language learning and the other (often more important) dimensions of their lives, language learning/using becomes authentic and responsibility is truly lifted from the teacher to the students. As van Lier (1996, pp. 136-144) correctly points out, authenticity is much more than authentic (real) texts. Authentic texts (in the sense of real) become authentic only if there is a gap to be filled in the student's mind, i.e. if the student finds the text and the task relevant to her/his real life needs. Schwienhorst's (2003) MOO Virtual Environment worked well, although it did not function in the way virtual environments 'in the real world' function. However, his students seem to have been able to find personal authenticity and they were autonomous in that they were exploiting the opportunities offered and participating in the learning environment (Schwienhorst, 2003). What is noteworthy is that in the process of creating personal authenticity through the use of authentic materials and tasks, a learner can be claimed to become autonomous in the sense that he/she 'is able to ... take and assume responsibility for his/her learning decisions' (Schwienhorst, 2003, p. 167).

### **Conclusion**

The approach taken in the context where this research was carried out seems to meet the parameter of particularity, one of the parameters that Kumaravadivelu (2001 and 2003) advocates when writing about his post-method approach. Particularity, i.e. taking into account the local realities, in the form of negotiation and open-endedness concerning materials and tasks, helped my students in creating personal authenticity and autonomy. However, as this research took place in one local context, it can offer only the beginnings of a global recipe for the emergence of personal authenticity. Therefore teachers need to experiment in their own contexts, with the help of reports from other teachers, and report on their findings, to be able to contribute to the discussion on personal authenticity. It is important to establish whether the trends exposed in this article are prevalent in other contexts. To what extent do other contexts show the relationship between personal authenticity and negotiation, and personal authenticity and authentic tasks and materials? Do students in other contexts find personal authenticity in the same way? Do they find the same kind of issues personally authentic? Do the opportunities offered have to be tailor-made to meet the

needs of each learning environment or do the opportunities offered in my context work in all learning environments? Reporting on research in other local contexts is needed.

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