

# Task Based Language Teaching in a Learner-Centered ESP Setting: A Case Study

---

Phoenix Lundstrom  
Kapiolani Community

*An instructional program, designed to assist a Japanese businessman improve his letter writing skills, was developed using task-based language learning in a learner-centered environment. Using this protocol, the learner accomplished 50% of his stated goals during the 14 week instructional period. The results strongly indicate that the inclusion of negotiation in a task-based learning setting greatly enhanced the ability of the learner to articulate and meet his goals. Before this technique is generalized to other ESP programs, however, additional studies using a variety of small-group settings, discourse requirements, and teaching personalities should be conducted.*

## 1. Introduction

English for specific purposes (ESP) focuses directly and specifically on the reason(s) the learner has for acquiring the language (Grosse, 1988a; Hristova, 1990; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Robinson, 1980). Krahnke (1987:61) considered task-based instruction appropriate in ESP because learners “have a clear and immediate need to use language for a well-defined purpose.” Even though the literature did not suggest it, the addition of learner-centered negotiation of the curriculum described by Hutchinson and Waters (1987), could create a result-focused ESP curriculum in which the student has a strongly vested interest. The salient features of both approaches were melded into a coherent ESP program for a management level Japanese businessman, the results of which are reported here as a case study.

### 1.1 *Task-based language learning*

The twin goals of ESP (efficient delivery of services and relevance<sup>1</sup> of services to the learner goals) are consistent with three facets of task-based language learning: needs analysis; problem-solving activities; small-group work.

---

<sup>1</sup> Relevance of the instruction to learner needs and desired outcomes may promote a high degree of success in ESP (Grosse, 1988a; Johns & Dudley-Evans, 1991; Kim, 1992). A high level of relevance may, in turn, act as a significant source of motivation (Crookes & Schmidt, 1989).

### 1.1.1 Needs Analysis

ESP, as a situation-specific program, necessarily requires a comprehensive needs analysis (Center for Applied Linguistics, 1985; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Johns & Dudley-Evans, 1991; Schmidt, 1981)<sup>2</sup> involving the employer and the employee. The completed needs analysis should provide the following:

1. task analysis of the target situation and the skills required
2. language required to appropriately perform in the target situation
3. gap between the current skills of the learner and those required in the target situation (This determination will inform the entry point for instruction.)
- 4 learner assessment of the goal and gaps

### 1.1.2 Problem-solving

Problem-solving (Grosse, 1988a, 1988b; Long, 1989), problem-posing (Auerbach & Burgess, 1989) and goal-orientation for ESP (Swales, 1990), create an intentional and productive focus on workplace-relevant meaning. Use of the target language is supported by the processes of investigation, discussion and action relating to the task. The target language, first used in the classroom, is generalizable to the workplace.

### 1.1.3 Group work

Long & Porter (1985) and Long (1989) suggest that group work may yield a higher quality of learner talk through increased opportunities for practice. Grosse (1988a) concurs, specifically suggesting small-group work for the ESP classroom. Both the clear focus of the interactions and the opportunities for individual attention address the affective needs of the learner and further motivate the learner in an already motivation-rich environment.

---

2 Task analysis is both product and process (identification, description and sequencing of all of the target language that is a part of the target behavior). The resulting documentation can serve as a comprehensive task description, a sequenced task syllabus, a tool for assigning the appropriate entry point for instruction, and an assessment tool for skill mastery (McCormick, 1990: see Bell, 1981; see also Mich. State Dept of Education Vocational-Technical Service task lists ERIC Documents ED 242901-11, 259151-63). In addition to listing the relevant language and job-specific non-transferable skills it should include potentially transferable skills, processes and language (Prince, 1984).

### *1.2 Learner-Centered Processes*

The learner-centered process emphasizes relevance of the program to learner needs (Auerbach, 1993), a view shared by ESP programs. Where learner-centered programs appear to diverge from ESP and task-based language learning, is curriculum development. In the learner-centered environment, learner participation begins with curriculum development (Auerbach, 1993; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987) and in the task-based language learning setting, learner participation begins with the needs analysis.

### *1.3 Negotiation*

One area accepted by both task-based language learning and the learner-centered approach as a necessary condition is negotiation. Whether defined psycho-linguistically as the request for clarification, subsequent identification and repair of a message (Pica, 1989) or pragmatically as the process of bringing about agreement, negotiation offers rich opportunities to use the learner's current linguistic resources as well as the emerging target language. In the learner-centered ESP environment envisioned by Hutchinson and Waters (1987), negotiation of the curriculum enhances the relevance of the program to the learner. A syllabus designed to promote the amount and quality of negotiation (Mohan, 1990) might include negotiation of outcome as well as meaning (Crookes & Rulon, 1985), two-way tasks that are purposeful i.e. focus on meaning (Long & Porter, 1985; Nobuyoshi & Ellis, 1993; Nunan, 1993), and negotiation for meaning between the learner and a more competent interlocutor (Crookes & Rulon, 1985; Kumaravadivelu, 1991; Long, in press). Negotiation between learner and teacher is further enhanced when the roles of expert and novice are shared: learner descriptions of their life experiences provide opportunities to negotiate for meaning (Crookes & Rulon, 1985; Delpit, 1988). Negotiation opportunities from the curriculum outward form an enhanced communicative environment which encourages the acquisition of the target language.

### *1.4 Case Study*

For this project, an environment was engineered to provide the maximum amount of negotiation for meaning and content during needs analysis, curriculum design and task-completion phases. Consequently, this setting required extensive

small-group task-based work between the learner and the interviewer<sup>3</sup> who shared the roles of expert and novice. The meta-level focus was on the development of a specific work-place related rhetorical form.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Subject

The subject was a 39 year old Japanese male enrolled in a work-place literacy program. The general manager of a Japanese tour company branch office, he had 10 years of formal English instruction in Japan and had been in the United States for 2 years. Testing<sup>4</sup> and assessment done by the literacy program indicated that the learner was moderately fluent. His grammar use reflected problems with article use, subject-verb agreement, and the tense system, areas that are typically resistant to early change for Japanese native speakers.

### 2.2 Methodology

The interview format, in a setting that was socially engineered to de-emphasize the status of the interviewer/instructor, required the learner to formulate specific ESP task objectives. Extensive negotiation of the curriculum and task-focused activities, as well as frequent exchanges of the roles of expert and novice, resulted in the development of an ordered list of distinct tasks leading to the learner-stated goal (see Figure 1).

#### Figure 1

Summary of tasks, interlocutor roles, and outcomes.

1. Identify business need for English language use.  
Roles: learner -> expert      interviewer -> novice  
RESULT: List of business functions
  
2. Identify skill area of general interest to learner

---

3 The term "interviewer" seems more appropriate here than "teacher" due to the frequency with which the learner played the role of expert.

4 Michigan ELI Listening Comprehension Test form 4, oral/aural score 36/45, reading score 62/80.

Roles: learner -> expert                      interviewer -> novice  
RESULT: Learner goal is to write effective business letters

3. Discourse analysis of skill area  
Roles: learner -> expert                      interviewer -> expert  
RESULT: Chart (see Figure 2)
4. Explore American business standards in letter writing  
Roles: learner -> novice                      interviewer -> expert  
RESULT: Letter formats tend to repeat themselves with minor adjustments. Learner goal is to prepare a reference book of letter types meeting standard letter-writing needs.
5. Select a target form.  
Roles: learner -> expert                      interviewer -> expert  
RESULT: Letter of apology
6. Analyze the complaint process.  
Roles: learner -> expert                      interviewer -> novice  
RESULT: Complaint form was generated by learner
7. Assess the politics of business letters.  
Roles: learner -> expert                      interviewer -> expert  
RESULT: Surface and deeper needs of customers were examined in addition to business concerns.
8. Assess the parts of an apology letter.  
Roles: learner -> novice                      interviewer -> expert  
RESULT: Four parts of an apology letter were identified-> greeting and acknowledgement, action, compensation, polite closing.
9. Write examples of each part of an apology letter.

Roles: learner -> novice            interviewer -> expert  
RESULT: Examples were composed.

10.        Select exemplars of three registers (acknowledgement, regret, great concern) for each apology letter type.

Roles: learner -> expert            interviewer -> expert

RESULT: Opening and closing paragraphs exemplars were selected.

11.        Perform final grammar checks.

The interviewer met with the learner twice weekly for 14 weeks in the work place literacy program offices where individual carrels were used for tutoring purposes. Each session lasted 1.5 hours. Early sessions concentrated on identifying language use patterns requiring English in the learner's working environment; the learner collected English language use data using audio-tapes and notes. He subsequently took the role of expert when informing the interviewer. The interviewer asked the learner to clarify and expand on the information, which promoted the use of spoken English. A list of functions the learner had to perform using English was developed:

1.        negotiate (service prices and billing procedures with local hotels and transportation providers)
2.        request (services)
3.        confirm (reservations)
4.        complain (about services)
5.        notify (customers of services)
6.        apologize (to customers)
7.        advertise
8.        participate (in business association functions)

Examination and discussion of the English language use lists resulted in the learner stating his initial goal: the ability to write clear, accurate and effective business letters.

Standard letter-writing practices in the United States and Japan were compared. Multi-source samples of letters collected by the learner, and some prompting from the interviewer, helped the learner to discover the following:

1. It is common business practice in the United States, to use form letters for standardized responses to frequently encountered situations.
2. Form letters and outlines for less-standard letters which require a more personal response, are kept on file for use by management and office staff.

The learner renegotiated his goal; development of a resource notebook of letters by type and register tailored to meet the needs of his business.

The learner's first task was to examine letters from his files and from samples provided by the interviewer to determine what types of information had been included in each letter. He then compiled a list of information types and made a comparison across letter types (see Figure 2).



Figure 2

Discourse analysis of business letter writing needs for English by activity type and operation required.

	Operation						
	Negotiate	Request	Confirm	Complain	Explain	Apologize	Ad.
Contact Name	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Contact Number	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
To: Transportation							
bus		x	x	x	x		
limo	x	x	x	x			
airport shuttle	x	x	x	x			
car rental		x	x	x	x		
airlines	x	x	x	x			
Hotels	x	x	x	x			
Restaurants	x	x	x	x			
Newspapers							x
Clients					x	x	
Re: #/rooms, seats		x	x	x	x		
rate/price	x	x	x	x	x		
class		x	x	x	x	x	
duration		x	x	x	x		x
special services:							
diet/menu		x	x	x	x		
wheel chair		x	x	x	x		
smoking				x	x	x	x
leis		x	x	x	x		
sight seeing		x	x	x	x		
room for disabled		x	x	x	x		
billing	x	x	x	x		x	
origin (point of)		x	x	x			
destination		x	x	x			
arrival time		x	x	x	x		

departure time	x	x	x	x	
job description					x
salary					x
hours					x
applicant					x
qualifications					

Discussion of the writing requirements revealed that all the categories except for the apology letter, could be covered by the use of form letters, a file of which the learner could develop on his own. Therefore, he decided the target discourse to be mastered through the work-place literacy program, would be the apology letter. The steps toward fulfilling this particular goal would be to clearly outline the complaint and response process, develop a complain checklist for use by his staff, train the staff in its use, and draft sample letters for each type of complaint. The first two steps were completed by the end of this project.

### **3. Results**

3.1 A collection of apology letter openings and closings that reflect three different registers constituted successful completion of the learner's second goal.

3.2 Over the course of 4 sessions, the learner and interviewer examined the customer-initiated cycle that would necessitate the use of an apology letter. Types of complaints, Japanese and American attitudes toward the presenting problem in a complaint, affective needs of the client and socio-economic needs of the learner's business were considered.

3.3 The product of these discussions was a complaint checklist to be used by all members of learner's staff when receiving a complaint call or letter. The checklist would make it easier for his staff to gather basic information from the customer including an assessment of the customer's affective needs. Examination of the presenting complaint and the affective needs involved would facilitate the analysis of the consequences (impact of the complaint on relationship between the learner's business and the client and between the learner's business and the service provider if applicable) and a determination of compensation based on a balance between the seriousness of the precipitating

action/event, the impact on the client and the resources of the business. In addition, the checklist would become a record of the complaint and action taken as well as a guide for writing the apology letter.

The learner reported that Figure 2 made his “mind clear. I realized that many facts of things were link[ed up]... It was very organized. I learned that there was [a]way of [considering] surface and deeper [motivations]....I learned how to analyze letter[s] and when I write [a] letter [I] have to follow (pay attention to) [the] situation....[I] have learn[ed] a lot of things...I feel very fresh (good) about [this] way of teaching.”

#### 4. Discussion

The success of this instructional design was dependent upon a number of factors:

1. the specific setting (English for business purposes)
2. the target discourse form (letter writing)
3. the moderately fluent proficiency level and high motivation of the learner
4. the skill of the interviewer to elicit responses from the learner
5. the ability of the interviewer to guide the process toward work-place literacy goals
6. the rapport between the interviewer and learner
7. the learner’s need for prestige which was fostered through a negotiation process emphasizing his expert status and the opportunity to use the English language apology letters with Japanese clients

Careful attention to each of these points allowed the interviewer and the learner to form a team, each adopting the roles of expert and novice when required, each with a clear goal in mind (selected by the learner).

In addition, the instructional process required both the learner and the interviewer to be flexible so that on-the-spot adaptations to the program could be made subsequent to the outcome of a negotiative event.

## 5. Conclusion

If task-based language learning and learner-centered approaches are considered as means to an end, their complementarity can be readily seen; in this project what happened was grounded in task-based learning while the way in which it was carried out reflected the learner-centered approach. The use of negotiation to perform a needs analysis, inform the curriculum, design and complete target tasks facilitated approaches. A cautious statement can be made therefore, in support of the use of task-based language teaching techniques in the learner-centered ESP classroom.

However, the use of only one subject, one setting (small-group), and a limited domain (apology letters for a service industry business), prohibit the offering of any broad generalizations about the effectiveness of this technique of instruction for ESP. Larger studies employing a number of students in small-group settings, focusing on other ESP target discourse types, and using other types of teaching personalities are required before the overall effectiveness of combining learner-centered processes with task-based language learning for ESP can be assessed. Perhaps this case study might encourage and challenge the reader to make that future effort.

## WORKS CITED

- Auerbach, E.** 1992. *Making Sense, Making Change*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Auerbach, E.** 1993. "Putting The p Back in Participatory." *TESOL Quarterly*, 27(3): 543-545.
- Auerbach, E. and Burgess, D.** 1989. "The Hidden Curriculum of Survival ESL." *TESOL Quarterly*, 19(3): 475-495.
- Bell, R.T.** 1981. "Appendix A: Job Analysis and ESP - case study on the canteen assistant" in R.T. Bell ed., *An Introduction to Applied Linguistics, Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching* (pp. 159-170). London: Batesford. ed.

- Center for Applied Linguistics.** 1985. "Passage: a journal of refugee education." *Passage*, 1(1). (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 254 099)
- Crookes, G. and Rulon, K.** 1985. "Topic and Feedback in NS/NNS Conversation." *TESOL Quarterly*, 22(4): 675-681.
- Crookes, G. and Schmidt, R.** 1989. "Motivation: Reopening The Research Agenda." *University of Hawaii Working Papers in ESL*, 8(1): 217-256.
- Delpit, L. D.** 1988. "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children." *Harvard Educational Review*, 58(3): 280-298.
- Grosse, C. U.** 1988a, April. *The American Evolution of English for Specific Purposes*. Paper presented at the 7th Annual Eastern Michigan University Conference on Languages for Business and the professions. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 304 922).
- Grosse, C. U.** 1988b. "The Case Study Approach to Teaching Business English." *English for Specific Purposes*, 7(2): 131-36.
- Hristova, R.** 1990. *Video for English for Specific Purposes*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (24th, Dublin, Ireland). (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 322 737).
- Hutchinson, T. and Waters, A.** 1987. *English for Specific Purposes: a Learning-Centered Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Johns, A. and Dudley-Evans, T.** 1991. "English for Specific Purposes: International in Scope, Specific in Purpose." *TESOL Quarterly*, 25(2): 297-314.
- Kim, Y.** 1992. *A Functional-notional Approach for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) Programs*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southwest Educational Research Association. Houston, Texas.
- Krahnke, K.** 1987. *Approaches to Syllabus Design for Foreign Language Teaching*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Kumaravadivelu, B.** 1991. "Language Learning Tasks: Teacher Intention and Learner Interpretation." *ELT Journal*, 45(2): 98-107.
- Long, M. H.** 1989. Task, Group & Task-group Interaction. *University of Hawaii Working Papers in ESL*, 8(2): 1-26.
- Long, M.H.** "The role of the linguistic environment in second language acquisition." in W.C. Ritchie & T.K. Bhatia eds., *Handbook of Research on Language Acquisition*, Vol. 2: *Second Language Acquisition*. New York: Academic Press.
- Long, M. H. and Porter, P.A.** 1985. "Group Work, Interlanguage Talk, and Second Language Acquisition." *TESOL Quarterly*, 19(2): 207-227.
- McCormick, L.** 1990. "Intervention Processes and Procedures" in L. McCormick & R.L. Schiefelbusch, eds., *Language Intervention, An Introduction*, pp. 215-260. New York: Merrill.
- Michigan Trade and Industrial Education.** 1984. *Architectural Drafting Curriculum Guide*. Lansing, Mich.:Michigan State Department of Education, Vocational-Technical Service. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 242 901).
- Mohan, B. A.** 1990. *LEP Students and The Integration of Language and Content: Knowledge Structures and Tasks*. Office of Bilingual Education and minority language affairs,

- Washington, DC. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 341 264).
- Nobuyoshi, J.** and **Ellis, R.** 1993. "Focused Communication Tasks and Second Language Acquisition." *ELT Journal*, 47(3): 203-210.
- Nunan, D.** 1993. "Task-based Syllabus Design: Selecting, Grading and Sequencing Tasks" in G. Crookes & S.M. Gass eds. *Tasks in a Pedagogical Context* (55-68). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Pica, T.** 1989. "Classroom Interaction, Negotiation and Comprehension: Redefining Relationships." *Papers in Applied Linguistics*, University of Alabama, 1(1): 7-35.
- Prince, D.** 1984. "Workplace English: Approach and Analysis." *English for Specific Purposes*, 3:109-116.
- Robinson, P.** 1980. *ESP: The Present Position*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Schmidt, M.F.** 1981. "Needs Assessment in English for Specific Purposes: The Case Study" in L. Selinker, E. Tarone, and V. Hanzeli eds. *English for academic and technical purposes*. Rowley: Newbury House. pp.199-210
- Schmidt, R.** 1992. "Psychological Mechanisms Underlying Second Language Fluency." *SSLA*, 14: 357-385.
- Swales, J.** 1990. "The Concept of Task" in J.M. Swales ed. *Genre Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 68-82.