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## Tasks and English as an International Language in Academic Settings

*Cet article examine l'application de l'apprentissage par tâches dans un contexte académique où l'internationalisation de l'éducation et les changements à l'égard de l'anglais à une échelle globale amènent de nouveaux défis pour ceux qui utilisent et apprennent cette langue. Nous soutenons que, pour faire face à ces défis, il convient dans l'enseignement d'encore plus souligner les aspects pragmatiques de l'interaction et de travailler à une meilleure prise de conscience des divers usages de l'anglais dans le monde. Cet article souhaite montrer qu'il est possible d'utiliser les tâches pour créer des situations d'apprentissage pertinentes et motivantes pour des apprenant-e-s adultes et pour amener la prise de conscience des questions clé autour de l'utilisation de l'anglais comme langue internationale.*

### Background and context

This article considers the use of tasks in an English course currently being developed and taught by the author at the University of Zurich and ETH Language Center. The Center provides language courses and support for undergraduate students at bachelor and master levels, doctoral candidates, and academic and administrative staff in 12 modern languages, reflecting both national and European policies of promoting multilingualism.

Since seminal work on tasks, (e.g. Long, 1989; Prabu, 1987), the use of tasks has become widespread in language teaching (Adams, 2009). The relevance of tasks in academic contexts can be linked to recent changes within Higher Education (HE). The Bologna Reform and global internationalisation of HE has led to an increasing use of English in non-English speaking

universities, resulting in both new opportunities and challenges for students, and staff (Mauranen *et al.*, 2010).

The spread of English as an international language (EIL) or global lingua franca (ELF)<sup>1</sup> is unprecedented (Gradol, 2006). McKay (2006:114) argues that “changes in the nature of English and English language learners warrant a re-evaluation of two widely accepted notions in ELT: namely, that the goal of English learning is native-speaker competence, and that native speaker culture should inform instructional materials and teaching methods.” She notes the importance in curriculum development of both recognising the nature and use of English as a global language, whilst also considering the ways it may be embedded in the local context.

Also of relevance to task-based learning and the task reviewed below is the



plea from a number of educationalists, notably Block (2003), that more attention be given to interpersonal or relational functions of language, thus moving beyond the traditional focus on language as a system. He notes that “Learning is about more than the acquisition of linguistic forms; it is about learners actively developing and engaging in ways of mediating themselves and their relationships to others ...” (Block, 2003:109). One of the strengths of task-based learning is that it allows for the creation of a social context and thus an inherent need to consider pragmatic aspects of communication.

The particular focus of the article is, firstly, on the use of tasks in raising awareness of pragmatic aspects of communication in English in non-English speaking contexts, and secondly, on the design of tasks that are both relevant to the context and personally motivating for course participants. Kasper and Rose (2001) provide a straightforward definition of pragmatics that is relevant to the teaching of EIL:

“... interpersonal rhetoric – the way speakers and writers accomplish goals as social actors who do not just need to get things done but must attend to their interpersonal relationships with other participants at the same time”. (Kasper & Rose, 2001:2)

## 2. Task-based learning and teaching for administrative staff and doctoral candidates

The task reviewed here is set within the context of a new course on Workplace Communication for participants whose level of competence in English is at least C1 on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), and who use English regularly for administrative work. The course is run over seven weeks with two teaching periods per week. Key aims relevant

to the task discussed here are to raise awareness of the nature and use of English internationally and in non-English speaking contexts, and to help participants to develop appropriate and flexible communication skills in English.

The profile of the current nine course participants is as follows:

<b>ETHZ</b>	6
<b>University of Zurich</b>	3
<b>Gender</b>	1 male 8 female
<b>Age ranges</b>	3 x 20-30 2 x 31-40 4 x 41-50
<b>Native languages</b>	Chinese, German, Slovak, Swedish
<b>Other languages within the group</b>	Czech, English, French, Italian, Spanish
<b>Languages used regularly at work</b>	Czech, English, French, German
<b>Posts</b>	3 senior administrators 3 office managers/admin. assistants 3 doctoral students (including 1 also middle-level administrator).

This reflects increasing diversity in academic contexts, notably in terms of age, linguacultural, professional and disciplinary backgrounds. Whilst this overview does not give detailed information on each individual, it is worth noting that English is used for both internal and external, i.e. international, communication by all participants.

The task reviewed here can be defined as a task as it fulfills the following criteria (Ellis, 2003):

1. Primary focus is on meaning;
2. There is a knowledge gap in terms of information to be conveyed and understood;

3. Learners rely on their own resources (linguistic and non-linguistic);
4. There is a clearly defined outcome, other than use or practice of language.

## 2.1 Background and pre-task phases

The task involves the simulation of a meeting. This was chosen as meetings are a central activity for most people in academic settings and often bring people together who have different goals, different working styles and affinities (Boden, 1994). Thus a certain amount of negotiation and adaptability is necessary. As a task, such a simulation offers an opportunity to enact and reflect on both transactional and relational functions of language, i.e. achievement of goals and nurturing of interpersonal relationships that underpin the achievement of goals.

The simulation is held in week four of the course. In the three prior lessons, a number of areas are covered which work towards achievement of the overall aims of the course, and feed into the meeting simulation. In the first lesson, input is given on change in relation to the English language, notably that there are now more non-native speakers of English than native speakers and that, as such, the language can no longer be considered to “belong” to the English. Consequently, whereas English was taught in the past with the aim of speaking to and like native speakers, this may no longer be relevant. Most learners or users will not need the language to integrate into an English-speaking environment, but to communicate with both native and non-native speakers internationally and, in many cases, in their home contexts.

Analysis and discussion on a number of e-mails is used to raise awareness of aspects of effective communication and potential pitfalls. For example, appropriate terms of address are considered as are cultural differences in

usage. The notion of politeness was raised by the current class at this stage. This is covered explicitly later in the course, particularly in relation to the fact that whilst politeness is universal in nature, its enactment varies according to context and problems may occur when expectations are different, yet interlocutors do not realise they are operating on different systems (Thomas, 1995).

Drawing on participants' own experience, a discussion is held on features of an effective meeting and what can go wrong with meetings. Subsequently, two activities are organized on relational aspects of language and monologic speech. Firstly, participants are given written input on giving feedback, taken from an authentic context. This covers aspects of feedback such as being specific and constructive. Participants are asked to reflect on this in relation to themselves, both as givers and receivers of feedback, and then discuss their experiences and feelings on the subject. This is directly connected with the following task, which, after input on structuring spoken language, involves each individual planning and delivering a talk on his or her working group or environment. In the current course, this included chairs, research groups and administrative offices. The talk should last no longer than

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two minutes. In groups of three, each person takes it in turn to speak, give feedback and act as timekeeper. Both of these preparatory tasks feed into the simulated meeting in that they address the need to find appropriate, often tactful language in interaction, and deliver information succinctly.

In week 2, the class divides into groups and are offered a choice of tasks (see below), which are intended to reflect concerns that could be of relevance to anyone working in a university. Participants are also encouraged to use their real workplace identities, to create greater authenticity and involvement. In the current course, one group chose Task 1 and the other Task 3.

Each group decides on who will chair the meeting and who will take notes and write up the minutes after the meeting. The participants organise and run the meeting with no input from the teacher. They are given the following instructions for homework:

**Choice of Tasks**

1. The University and the ETH are seeking means for saving money at grass-roots level, i.e. in individual offices. Your mandate is to brainstorm and collect ideas and then decide which would be most feasible to implement throughout the two organizations.
2. You have been asked to make proposals for team-building activities that would be appropriate for staff from a wide range of backgrounds and ages. These would then be proposed to team leaders throughout the two organizations as "templates" for team building.
3. You are required to consider the subject of training and professional development within our organizations, particularly in relation to the time constraints we all face. Brainstorm the issue and make suggestions for different approaches to training, e.g. with regard to time, place and meeting individual needs.

- The Chair(s) should set up the meeting and circulate the agenda for the meeting in lesson 4. In preparing for the meeting you can mail each other if necessary and later submit the e-mails to the teacher for feedback.

This reflects one of the principles of task-based learning in that the teacher should stand back and allow the learners to use their own resources.

**2.2 The task: simulation of a meeting**

In the meeting simulation, the focus is very much on appropriacy, and the task is what Ellis (2003) terms as "unfocused" in that it is not designed to elicit the use of particular forms. Before the meeting begins, the teacher explains her role in that she will be observing and taking notes for feedback and discussion after the meeting, but will not be involved or available for questions.

In the current course, both groups were very well prepared and the Chairs were effective in the use of their organizational skills and the language. With regard to language, a number of interesting points can be noted. The group working on economising had spent time before the meeting introducing each other by mail, in addition to exchanging goal-related points. This appeared to result in the building of interpersonal rapport and a relaxed yet enthusiastic approach from the beginning of the meeting. The cohesive nature of the group was reflected in backchannelling, similar body language, simultaneous laughter and, above all, a level of trust that allowed open questions and answers regarding understanding. The Chinese member of the group, a doctoral student and researcher, maintained good eye contact at all times and was consequently able to gauge a possible lack of understanding at one point, apparent through the others' slightly confused looks.

She asked at this point, “do you understand what I mean?”. Her tone was open and non-threatening. After a pause, one of the group responded “not exactly” and they all laughed. Identifying a lack of understanding is of importance, but also admitting to not having understood is crucial, although it may be difficult to enact diplomatically. The indirectness of “not exactly” avoided offence and possible feelings of incompetence on either side. The lack of understanding had probably arisen because the Chinese doctoral student’s accent, which, although clear, was unfamiliar to the rest of the group. Later, a further lack of understanding arose between the same doctoral student and the others, this time because of disciplinary differences. The doctoral student wanted to explain that materials left over after experiments could perhaps be used elsewhere. However, the other members of the group were initially unable to understand exactly what she meant by materials. When she gave the concrete example of

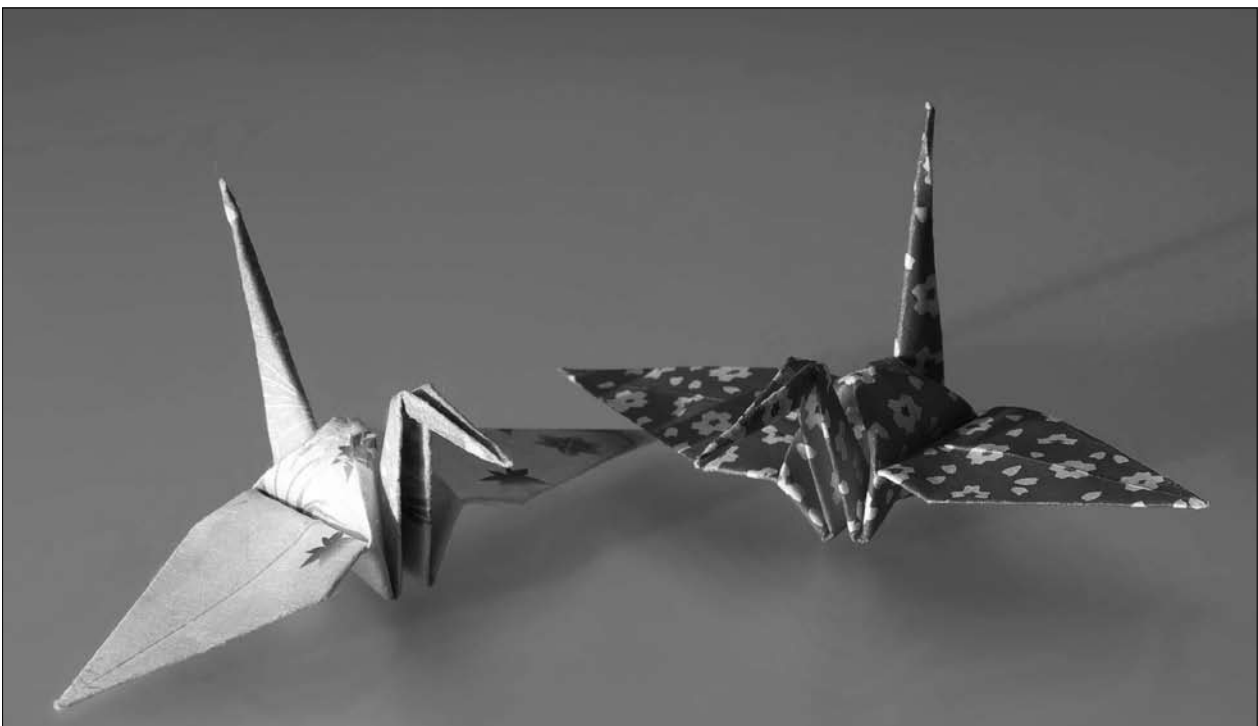
chemicals, the meaning became clear and helped the others to enter a very different environment from their office workplaces. When discussed after, this served to show that difficulties in communication can arise from disciplinary differences and that concrete examples can be helpful in overcoming these difficulties.

The groups also showed the ability to negotiate meaning in finding suitable lexis when a particular word did not come to mind at once. For example, when the word “confidential” would have been appropriate, but the speaker appeared to be searching for the word, saying “how do you say”, another participant came up with the word “sensitive” and the original speaker noted “yes, sensitive material”. Research into English as a lingua franca (ELF) has shown that such mutual support, accommodation and negotiation of meaning is a successful feature of language in ELF communication (Mauranen & Ranta, 2009).

### 2.3 Post-task phase and activities

After the meeting, participants in each group were asked how they felt about the meeting and feedback was positive. The teacher then gave each individual feedback in terms of language. A number of participants in the group were not formulating questions correctly, for example saying “why you don’t ...”. This may have been due to communicative pressure or fossilized errors. It is important in feedback on such tasks to emphasise the effectiveness of communication, rather than to focus too much on grammatical errors, particularly when this is not the main aim of the task. Nevertheless, advanced learners can find feedback on habitual grammatical errors helpful in giving them specific targets for improvement.

Further feedback was given on particular linguistic forms and their pragmatic impact, focusing on good examples, such as one participant saying “I just have one little comment” in prefacing disagreement with another participant. Here, the words “just” and “little”



serve to down tone the impact of the disagreement. In other cases, input was rather direct, for example, “I feel completely bored by that” with respect to one of the ideas put forward by another participant for team-building activities. How this might impact on the listeners was briefly discussed and alternatives formulated. Use of words that are not English or refer to information that is based on the local context were also considered. “Protocol” (a false cognate of the German “Protokoll”) does not mean “minutes” in English and could cause confusion in international meetings. Similarly, reference to ASVZ would need explanation, i.e. the sports association. It is recognized that anyone working in the German-speaking part of Switzerland would quickly learn the local meaning of “handy” and “beamer”, however for new arrivals or visitors it is important to use standard forms and be aware of differences such as “cell phone” and “mobile phone” in different varieties of English.

#### 2.4 Follow-up tasks and activities

Further shorter tasks are also integrated into the final lessons of the course, notably roleplays and discussions relating to difficult situations the course participants have to deal with either face to face or on the telephone. Pedagogically, this allows recycling of points covered in earlier parts of the course and thus deepening of knowledge and increased self-awareness through the creation of different situations for interaction.

#### Conclusions

In this article, the application of tasks has been shown to be of value in replicating social contexts and raising awareness of aspects of interaction that are of direct relevance to the learners. In times of global change, Kachru (2008:181) argues that “It is

crucial for the increasing globalizing communities to make sure that their interactions using various Englishes across cultures and communities are effective in realizing the goals of such interactions.”

Standard varieties of English that are codified in terms of grammar and vocabulary are of clear value in teaching, as one cannot “teach” diversity. Yet many learners remain unaware of the heterogeneous nature of English and its spread around the globe until they are confronted with concrete challenges deriving from the diversity in uses of English as an international language. Mauranen *et al.* (2010:7) note that: “The successful use of ELF demands new skills from its speakers, native or non-native, compared to those which traditional language education has prepared people for.” Task-based learning would appear to be an ideal vehicle to develop these skills that go beyond idealized native speaker models and raise awareness of new challenges in using English as an international language, where an emphasis on comprehensibility and effective communication through adaptability, self-awareness and openness to differences are of prime importance.

#### Note

<sup>1</sup>The terms English as an international language (EIL) and English as a lingua franca (ELF) are often used interchangeably. It is important to note that ELF is a field of research concerning language in use and language planning. Both terms refer to functions of use in the language, i.e. what users “do” with the language and are not codified varieties of English that can be taught. Findings from the research are, however, of considerable pedagogical value.

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