

Supporting State-approved Materials with the Values Clarification Task

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Abstract

Many teachers in Asian EFL situations report difficulties integrating communicative tasks into their classrooms. This study reports on an innovation in which opinion gap tasks were used to support the regular classwork of a middle school English class in Seoul, South Korea. The task had to reflect the learning objectives of the state-mandated textbook while encouraging students to speak up and express their opinions. The classroom teacher wanted to ensure students who had pre-studied the materials at after-school classes would still be engaged with the task. A values clarification (VC) task was developed for this purpose. This study reports how the VC task performance reflects the types of talk theorized to benefit language learning.

Keywords

Task-based instruction, values clarification, focused tasks, opinion-gap tasks, instructed Second Language Acquisition, classroom talk, teacher talk

Introduction: The Teaching Context and Need for Change

Many EFL teachers in Asian contexts have difficulty implementing communicative tasks into their classrooms (Butler, 2011). This is also true in South Korea despite recent changes to the English curriculum that promote task-based learning (Ministry of Education, 2015). In the winter of 2015, the author was approached by a former student of his who was teaching in a middle school in Seoul. She was having difficulty in her classes because many of her students were pre-learning their lessons. She explained that many of her students studied at after-school academies (called '*hakwon*') where they were taught the next semester's material in advance. She, however, was required to teach

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with a government-approved textbook (in this case, Lee et al., 2013). As most of her students had studied the content at their after-school classes, they considered her lesson merely a review of the content. However, the remainder of her students did not have the financial means to attend after-school classes, and so, for them, the text was new. She complained that this disparity demotivated her students. Those who attended academies would ask to be allowed to do other homework rather than study material they had been taught already, while those who had not pre-studied the material objected.

Moreover, she reported that even if her students had pre-learned the material, they often forgot it. This resulted in the paradoxical situation where learners felt they were wasting time relearning old items, but had actually not mastered the material. What the teacher wanted was tasks that would use the language targets from the textbook in such a way that both types of student would benefit. She believed that encountering the target items multiple times in new contexts, i.e. iteration (Larsen-Freeman, 2010: 43–48), would both (1) motivate both the pre-studiers and those who had not encountered the material before, and (2) provide new and memorable learning opportunities for all her students. Ultimately, she wanted activities that were distinct from after-school academy teaching that could motivate her ‘pre-learning’ students to re-engage with the material without discouraging those who did not pre-learn the materials.

Together we decided to add a values clarification task (Manning, 2015) to one of her grade 2 middle school classes after students had done the main reading for the unit. The class was a middle (of three) level class located in south-eastern Seoul. There were 35 female students in the class, 27 of whom consented to be audio recorded provided their names were not revealed. The study was carried out in December 2015. Her other classes used the regular textbook materials to prepare for the end of semester exams.

Introducing the Values Clarification Task

The values clarification task is an opinion-gap task (Ellis, 2003) which requires students to reach a consensus (i.e. it is convergent and not divergent). The VC task is relatively easy to set up and carry out. The exact steps of the VC task are as follows:

1. Divide the students in groups of three or four students.
2. Give each student a set of prompts.
TIP: Be sure to include target grammar or vocabulary in each prompt.
3. Students read the prompts silently and indicate their level of agreement by marking it with a ✓ or an X.
TIP: Allow enough time for students to read each prompt and to note down reasons they agree or disagree. Planning time will improve the conversation (Ellis, 2005).
4. Students choose a captain and secretary for the group. Give out an answer sheet for them to write their final consensus on.
TIP: Collect this sheet at the end of the task.
5. Tell the students to talk about the statements and rewrite the prompts so that all members of the group strongly agree with the new version.
TIP: Only one student (the secretary) should write. As this person writes the others watch and pay attention to the accuracy of the language of the final version (Manning, 2014, Manning, 2015).

TIP 2: Requiring a consensus forces students to negotiate the linguistic content of the final version and promotes talk about both opinion and language (Manning, 2014).

(Based on Gower, 1981; Manning, 2014, Manning, 2015).

Step 5 is essential. Gower (1981) called for this step, but more recent versions ignore it (e.g. Sanabria and Sanabria, 2008: 119). Manning (2014, Manning, 2015) observed that students paid attention to form to a greater extent, as indicated by an increase in grammar-focused Language Related Episodes (LREg) (Swain and Lapkin, 1998), while one member was writing than when they were discussing the prompt before writing. It was during collaborative writing that learners paid increased attention to the form of what was being said and written.

Following Up the VC Task

It is possible to end the VC task after step 5; however, less engaged learners may simply agree with every prompt in order to avoid doing the task (Manning, 2014: 188–95). There will then be no need to talk and no learning opportunities. To prevent this, use a public report at the end of the task (Willis and Willis, 2007).

In this case the teacher used an ‘express-and-defend’ activity. One student (chosen at random) presented their group’s opinion of one prompt to another group for 60 seconds. The members of the other group listened. When the speaker finished, the listeners were instructed to disagree with what was said and to try to convince the speaker to change their opinion. This created a reason for listening and promoted lively debate between the presenter and the listeners. After five minutes, the teacher asked if any changes had been made and why.

There are other possibilities for a post-task public report, however, the express-and-defend activity directly iterated the target language from the textbook, so it fit the national curriculum. The written final revised statements comprise a second report. The sheet with the group’s answer can be collected and used as the basis of lexico-grammatical instruction later on in that class or in the next class. This reflects Willis and Willis’ (2007) argument for language focus activities to come after the main task.

The VC Task Used in this Study

Figure 1 shows the prompts used in the study. They were based on the required textbook (Lee et al., 2013, Lesson 8). The circled items in Figure 1 are some of the target vocabulary and grammar items listed for this lesson. If all the steps are followed, the students encounter the target vocabulary and grammar in their textbook’s pre-reading, main reading and post reading activities. Adding the VC task after the reading encourages students to:

1. Reread the selected target items
2. Understand them
3. Talk about the topic using them
4. Talk about them directly
5. Rewrite the statement using them.

<i>Opinion Statement</i>	<i>SD D A SA</i>
(1) As I go to school more and more, it gets more and more interesting. Reason:	-- -- --
(2) I love to have friends who are very similar to me because we can share everything. Reason:	-- -- --
(3) I am interested in going to music and art academies because I am looking forward to being an artist in the future. Reason:	-- -- --
(4) If you read a lot of novels, something interesting happens. Reason:	-- -- --
(5) I remember all the vocabulary I learnt last week. Reason:	-- -- --
(6) It must be easy to be a teacher. Reason:	-- -- --

Figure 1. Sample VC Task Prompt Used to Accompany Lee et al. (2013, Lesson 8).

The selection of these items from those listed in the text was admittedly based on the teacher’s intuition, but Willis recommends teachers use their intuition and experience when making tasks (Willis and Willis, 2007). Crucially, this way the teacher can tailor the national curriculum to better meet their students’ needs.

How the VC Task Helped

The goal of this intervention was to use pre-specified language in a new, motivating way that would engage students with the task and allow for iteration of the target items. Examining the students’ talk shows this happened.

Iteration While Understanding the Prompt

Students who did not know what the statement meant had to ask other students. Talking about the prompt clarified the meaning of its words and grammar. Extract 1 shows one group of four middle schoolers determining the correct meaning of a prompt.

Extract 1. Students Negotiating the Meaning of Prompt 4¹ (from Fig. 1)

1. S2: I can’t understand this sentence
2. S1: it means that-
3. S4: -it means that when we- when we-
4. S2: - 소설 소개 책주인공 (= about the main character of the novel)
5. S1, S4: //no no no no \\
6. S2: //이 내가된다운\ (= this is me)
7. S4: no no no no when we read the books 아니야 (= no) 소설을 읽으면 이소설과 비슷한 것은아니어도 . . 이 소설: (= when you read a novel even if it is not similar to this one ... this novel)
8. S2: 아 아 (= ah ah) strongly disagree about this one (unintelligible)
9. S1: it means that if we read a novel
10. S4: novel

11. S1: it I for example I read a novel and then the next day uh I . . . um I'm (unintelligible) yeah just like that something happens something interesting happens after I read the novel
12. S2, S3: strongly disagree

In line 2, S2 indicates she does not understand the meaning of '*If you read a lot of novels, something interesting happens*'. She thought it meant that she would become like a character in the novel (lines 4 and 6). The others tried to explain to her in L1 and finally S1 provided an explanation in English. This example is curious because these students had already been taught the expression '*If (A), something interesting happens*' as part of their pre-reading lexical targets, and encountered it in their text book's reading. However, S2's interpretation of '*something interesting*' was to physically become a character in the novel. In other groups the interpretation was different, for example: '*If I read a novel, I learn interesting things about different places or peoples so I get smarter... and that's interesting*' (S6 task talk). So, even though the students know the literal meaning of '*something interesting*' the students still had to negotiate its meaning in this new context, expanding their linguistic resources.

Iteration While Expressing Personal Opinions

As anticipated, students had opinions they were eager to share. Helping them learn to express and support their opinion is an important academic skill – one that is included on standardized speaking tests (Educational Testing Service, 2016). The VC task iterates this function six times through the task, once per prompt. Extract 2 shows the middle schoolers' approach to giving their opinions. They are discussing the prompt, '*As I go to school more and more, it gets more and more interesting*' (Fig. 1).

Extract 2: Expressing Opinion about Prompt 1

13. S2: ... as I go to school more and more it gets more and MORE easy and interesting but sometimes ... I get tired
14. S3: when I go to school I can learn many things about some subjects also uh make a good friends and play- play with good- play with friends at break time
15. S4: mmm okay I strongly agree because I can know something more as I learn more. So it gets easier and I love school

The targeted item in this prompt was '*As (A happens), (B also happens)*'. Only one student used this form exactly as in the text (line 13). S3 changes '*as*' to '*when*' and lists the benefits of going to school – rephrasing the target to a more familiar format, an iteration of function, not form. In line 15, S4 uses part of the target '*as I learn more*' and uses the comparative '*easier*' rather than '*more interesting*'. This means the linguistic target in the prompt may not be used exactly, but learners will generate sentences that perform similar functions. If this were the extent of the talk however, it would be difficult to argue

for using the VC task over the simpler to administer Small Group Discussion Task. But, because there is the requirement to revise the statement into one that all members strongly agree with, following Gower (1981), another process must occur – that of negotiating a consensus.

Iteration While Negotiating a Consensus

The students must all strongly agree on a re-worded version of the original prompt. This requires them to nominate new vocabulary items, suggest grammar changes, and refer to each other's opinion. This extends the linguistic demands of the task and recycles target language from the prompts. Extract 3, below shows the students continuing their discussion of prompt 1 (Extract 2 and Fig. 1, above).

Extract 3. Middle Schoolers Continuing their Discussion of Prompt 1.

16. S1: As I go to school more and more it gets more and more and more easy and interest- exciting but sometimes
17. S2: become angry
18. S1: tired tired
19. S4: okay good
20. S3: Can you say that again
21. S1: as I go to school more and more
22. S2: write it (S2 is telling S3 to write down their final revised version)
23. S1: but sometimes hard
24. S4: sometimes
25. S1: tired
26. S4: sometimes we get tired
27. S4: (dictating) more and more it gets more and more easy and interesting
28. S4: (dictating) interesting but sometimes
29. S1: sometimes
30. S2: tired
31. S4: we get tired
32. S2: sometime/Z/ (emphasizing that the 's' is missing in the writing)

As they write their final version, the importance of having only one writer (as opposed to all students writing the final version) becomes apparent. All four members of this group focus on what S1 is writing resulting in attention to the precision of their language as they create the final wording of the statement: '*interesting*' becomes '*exciting*' (line 16); '*angry*' becomes '*tired*', then '*hard*', and then '*we get tired*' in line 26. Moreover, they reuse '*As (A), (also B)*' in lines 16 and 21. Finally, there is direct correction of grammar, i.e. a grammar-focused Language Related Episode (LREg), in line 32 when S2 stresses the /z/ sound on '*sometimes*' to correct S3's written version which had no 's'. This focus on the missing 's' happened as S3 was writing and corroborates Manning (2015) who reported that LREg occur more often while one member was in the act of writing their final reworded statements.

Extracts 1–3 demonstrate the range of linguistic contexts provided by the VC task that allow for iterative use of targeted items. In addition, follow-up tasks and public reports provide further uses of the specified forms in new contexts.

Reflection

The teacher reported that the class was far more lively and enthusiastic than normal. This could have been due to the novelty of the task, and not the task itself. But listening to the recordings of the students revealed not just the increased activity, but the amount of talk about and use of the targeted items. The teacher also reported that her students had enjoyed the opportunity to express themselves. More importantly, both the pre-studying students and those who had not pre-studied completed the task.

For this group of learners, the values clarification task promoted authentic and personally relevant discussion. It also added the component of enhancing both explicit and implicit linguistic knowledge. Explicit knowledge was enhanced through LREg that occurred during task talk. Implicit knowledge built up through multiple iterations and generative use of language targets embedded in the prompts. In short, the VC task used an opinion gap as a vehicle for both fluent and accurate language development. If integrated into an existing course, in a ‘task-supported’ approach (Samuda and Bygate, 2008: 60), it can be one of a range of tasks that teachers have at their disposal in EFL school settings such as in South Korea.

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Note

1. L1 Korean is reported in Hangeul script followed by a translation in parentheses with an equal sign (=translation).

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