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FROM WHENCE DID THIS COME?

An examination of the assumptions underlying
the Reading Program
at the English Language Institute
at the University of Hawaii at Manoa

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Introduction

Recently "task" has been a buzzword in language education. Most of the materials development and research, however, have focused on the listening and speaking skills. The English Language Institute at the University of Hawaii is unusual in that it has also created a two course task-based reading program. This paper describes the reading program, its theoretical assumptions, and the articulation between the two courses. Finally it considers a few of the limitations of the courses.

Description of the English Language Institute

The English Language Institute (ELI) provides instruction in academic English to foreign students who are enrolled in content area classes at UH-Manoa. Instruction is provided in reading, listening, and writing for students at all academic levels.

Foreign students must obtain a TOEFL score of 500 or above in order to attend UH-Manoa. Those students whose scores fall within the 500-600 range must take the ELI Placement Test (ELIPT) at the beginning of their first semester. The ELIPT is a battery of tests designed to measure whether the students' English proficiency is at an appropriate level to cope with the language demands of an academic setting. Students are placed into one of two levels in each skill area or are exempted based primarily on their score on the ELIPT, with their TOEFL scores, previous academic background and an interview taken into consideration.

The ELI classes are very heterogeneous; students vary in ethnicity, first language, gender, age, university level (undergraduate, Master's, Ph.D. and post-Doctoral), and academic major. The average class size is about 19 students. Classes meet for two and a half hours per week, and there are approximately 15 weeks in a semester.

The ELI is administered by a Director, Assistant Director, and a Curriculum Committee comprised of lead teachers and faculty resource teachers for each skill area. Lead teachers divide their time between teaching and curriculum development for their skill area. ELI

instructors are generally Graduate Assistants or Lecturers pursuing an M.A. in the Department of ESL. Most have had some previous second language teaching experience. Instructors are also expected to attend weekly meetings and to take an active role in curriculum development.

Description of ELI 72 and ELI 82

Within the reading program, there are two levels of courses: ELI 72 and ELI 82. ELI 72 is for students who would score approximately between 500 and 550 on the TOEFL, while ELI 82 is for students who would score approximately between 550 and 600. Students may initially be placed into 72, in which case the student must take two semesters of reading instruction, or into 82, in which case the student only has one semester of reading instruction.

Both ELI 72 and 82 utilize two types of materials: tasks and a reading packet. Students read authentic, academic readings in various content areas through the completion of pedagogical tasks. These tasks are supplemented by readings about the process of reading.

At the 72 level, students complete eight small-scale tasks in four or five task categories over the course of the semester. Students, in private consultation with the instructor, choose from a list of ten tasks in each category. The topics of the readings vary widely within a category, but each of the tasks asks the students to use the same reading strategies under the same context. After the student has completed one task in each of the first four categories, the student negotiates the remaining four tasks with the instructor. Students then have some flexibility in which categories they will choose and in reading material. Students may provide their own readings if the instructor approves.

The first two task categories in ELI 72 are very similar. Task Category A is researching a term paper or oral presentation without a production requirement and Task Category B is researching a term paper or oral presentation with a production requirement.

In these categories, students are guided in the selection of reading materials in the library. Once the reading material has been located, students are asked to scan the table of contents, skim the reading, scan for specific details, and then to read thoroughly, identifying main ideas. Task Category A asks the students to highlight the main ideas, whereas Task Category B asks the students to write a summary or an outline of the main ideas.

Task Category C represents preparing for lectures and class discussion. Students are asked to apply the SQ3R method of reading first by skimming the reading, and then by creating a question based on each heading in the reading. Finally, students answer the questions that they have created after they have read the material thoroughly.

Task Category D asks students to read in preparation for an exam. Students anticipate exam questions and then answer the questions that they themselves have created.

Finally, in Task Category E, students simulate the process used in a laboratory experiment. Students are asked to follow directions sequentially in order to make a product such as a baked good or a kite. Students show the product as evidence that they have understood the directions.

The types of texts used in each of these categories varies. Some of the text types include books, textbooks, magazines, journals, newspapers, research reports, annals, etc. During the negotiation of tasks between the instructor and student, the instructor tries to ensure that the student will encounter a variety of text types while completing the tasks over the course of the semester.

These content area readings are supplemented by a reading packet which is identical for each student. The reading packet includes the syllabus, directions for completing the tasks, approximately 150 pages of discussions of how to perform various reading skills taken from a variety of ESL and L1 textbooks, and worksheets for learning to locate materials in the library.

At the 82 level, students perform three larger-scale tasks over the course of the semester. The first task is an annotated bibliography. Students select their own topics, and

then search for and evaluate a variety of related sources. These sources come from an array of academic text types. Once sources have been selected, students preview the sources, identify the main ideas and write a one paragraph summary. Students also analyze the features of the text and write one paragraph of comments.

The second task requires students to prepare for a debate. In small groups, students select a controversial topic. Each individual finds four related sources and reads them critically. Students formulate arguments and counterarguments and support their arguments with evidence found in the readings. Finally, each small group conducts an actual debate on the topic during class.

The third task asks students to conduct a literature review. Students individually select their own topics, and then find, evaluate and critically read five related sources. Students are required to synthesize the information and to present it in a standard academic term-paper format complete with in-text citations.

Like the 72 course, these authentic and self-selected readings are supplemented with a reading packet. The reading packet includes the task directions and samples from previous students, approximately 150 pages of metacognitive reading strategy discussions, and library worksheets.

Theoretical assumptions underlying the reading program

The ELI reading program is based on assumptions about the nature of language, language learning, task as the unit of analysis and the reading process. These courses view language as more than underlying hierarchies of linguistic structures and language proficiency as more than the mastery of those structures. Based on the current, prevalent theoretical view, "language competence" is seen to be comprised of both organizational and pragmatic competence. Organizational competence reflects both grammatical and textual competence while pragmatic competence entails illocutionary and sociolinguistic

competence (Canale & Swain 1980; Bachman 1990). In short, language is considered to be meaningful communication.

Corresponding to the view of language as meaningful communication, most recent language learning theories have focused on communicative approaches and syllabi have been organized around situations, topics or functions (Candlin 1976 as cited in Richard and Rodgers 1986; Widdowson 1978; Wilkins 1976). In the case of the ELI reading program, the concept of functions has evolved into that of task types.

Task has been defined in various manners in recent years (Breen 1987; Long 1989; Long & Crookes 1989; Nunan 1989; Prabhu 1987). For the purposes of this paper, task is defined as "an activity or action which is carried out as a result of processing or understanding language (i.e. as a response)...Tasks may or may not involve the production of language" (Richards et al. 1985).

Researchers distinguish between two types of tasks: target tasks and pedagogic tasks. Target tasks are the things that the learners must actually do with the language in the real world. Identification of target tasks for a particular group of learners through a task-based needs analysis is an important component of task-based curriculum design. Once target tasks have been identified and classified into task types, pedagogic tasks are derived and sequenced to form a task-based syllabus. Ideally pedagogic tasks will mirror target tasks as closely as possible; pedagogic tasks should be a rehearsal for the real world tasks.

Most of the research into task-based syllabus design has focused on the listening and speaking skills. In order to explain why it is also appropriate for reading programs, it is necessary to analyze some of the assumptions the courses make about the reading process. Instead of viewing reading as merely a passive, bottom-up process of decoding, these courses assume that the reader utilizes his background and strategic competence to make active top-down guesses while reading. The interpretation of the text depends partially on the reader's background and existing schema. Therefore, reading is considered to be an interactive process (Anderson & Pearson 1988; Swaffar 1988).

Both schema theory and the interactive model of reading suggest that reading courses must go beyond the practice of selecting and teaching reading skills in isolation according to an artificial taxonomy of skill development (Carrell 1988; Carrell & Eisterhold 1988). The ELI reading courses do this by focusing on the types of target academic reading tasks that the students need to perform in their content area courses. These courses stress the acquisition of reading strategies in appropriate contexts. Students not only learn the skills that are necessary for the application of strategies, they also learn when it is appropriate to use them. Furthermore, by allowing students some degree of freedom in choosing the topics of the readings, the courses promote the use of existing schema.

Accordingly, the purpose of the materials in both courses is to assist the students in learning effective and efficient processes of reading under different academic contexts. The pedagogical tasks strive to be as authentic as possible without overwhelming the students with the complexity of the task. The task readings are all authentic. The activities vary depending on the type of task being performed.

There are several other implications of focusing on the completion of tasks. In order to try to make the tasks most closely approximate real world conditions, other language skills than reading are involved. In order to allow the instructor more time in assessment, writing skills are those that are usually employed. Furthermore, skills instruction is incidental to the materials and there is little to no grammar instruction. Given that the readings are authentic, there is little control for syntax or vocabulary. Finally, given the individualized topics and the eclectic nature of the content, there is little organized, group-oriented content-schema building activities or vocabulary instruction.

Articulation between the courses

The previous discussion outlines common assumptions of both the courses in the ELI reading program. However, further theoretical assumptions are made clear when the articulation between the two courses is examined.

Both courses ask students to complete pedagogical tasks which mirror the processes used in real world academic reading tasks. However, the 72 level students are given much more guidance in the completion of these tasks. These tasks are less complex in that each step has been explicitly layed out and made clear to the students. For example, in Task Categories A & B, students are told which library computer database would be appropriate and which search terms they should type in. At the 82 level, students take the responsibility for these decisions themselves, although the instructor is there to assist if necessary. One assumption underlying this distinction is that macro tasks can be broken down into a series of more manageable steps. Another assumption is that more advanced students need to be able to identify and carry out the various steps in sequence primarily by themselves because they are not given that type of assistance in their content area courses. Therefore, the 82 level courses more closely resemble the real world tasks than the 72 level courses.

Another distinction between the two courses is the amount of synthesis that is required. In the 72 level course, the students are required to recognize main ideas and to synthesize information from various paragraphs. But students only work with one reading text at a time. At the 82 level, students are required to synthesize information from four or five different sources. Thus, it is assumed that inter-text synthesis is more difficult than inter-paragraph synthesis.

The type of reading also varies to a certain extent between the two courses. The 72 level focuses on the comprehension of the main ideas. The 82 level assumes that students are able to recognize the main idea and asks students to be more critical. In two of the three tasks at the 82 level, students need to be able to distinguish between fact and opinion and to

choose which pieces of evidence offered in the readings would best support their arguments. Hence, the program assumes that comprehension is a prerequisite for critical reading, but that critical reading is an essential ability for reading for academic purposes.

This differentiation is also apparent in the incidental teaching of skills. Many of the skills presented in 72 are reviewed in 82, but there are a few that do not overlap. A comparison of the reading packets shows that the vast majority of skills are covered in both courses (See Appendix A). However, only 72 students discuss preparing for an exam as this is a task type that is covered only in the first course. Furthermore, only 82 students discuss analyzing text characteristics, distinguishing fact from opinion, analyzing arguments, finding support for one's own opinion and writing citations.

Limitations of the program design

While the program seems to be based on many of the assumptions of current theory, it does not go as far in some regards as perhaps some people might wish. Both courses make an effort to be more learner-centered than previous textbook-using courses offered at UH. While there is relatively great freedom in regards to content, there is very little choice regarding task-type. These types have been set a priori based on a needs analysis of previous cohorts of students. There is no mechanism to determine the needs of this particular group of students and to base the task types on their needs (or desires), if different from the previous cohorts.

Furthermore, given the freedom in choosing content, students work primarily on an individual basis. It is difficult for the instructor to create content schema building pre-reading activities and vocabulary exercises for each student individually. Since only the process is similar in each task, it is also more difficult to have the students discuss the readings. Therefore, cooperative learning is minimized to a certain extent.

Note that there is a tension here. If the program is made more learner-centered, it becomes even more individualized. Yet there is also a desire to increase the amount of opportunities that students have to work with each other.

From an administrative point of view, another drawback is that the materials constantly will be in flux. As materials become outdated, they need to be revised. While this is good for the students, it does require a commitment from the program developer to constantly be evaluating and revising the materials.

Conclusion

The task-based orientation of the ELI reading program appears to be theoretically well-grounded. It takes into consideration some of the latest views towards language, language learning, task as a unit of analysis and the reading process. A closer evaluation is necessary, though, to determine how well the materials are working. In other words, do the tasks lead the students to learn the appropriate reading strategies for various academic contexts. An evaluation might also determine if changes might be desirable, such as increasing the learner-centeredness of the course or increasing the number of cooperative activities of the students.

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Articulation of Skills Explicitly Taught in ELI 72 & 82

	<u>72</u>	<u>82</u>
Tips for improving reading rate	X	X
Skimming	X	X
Scanning	X	X
SQ3R	X	X
Finding main ideas	X	X
Organizational patterns	X	X
Vocabulary - learning context clues	X	X
Vocabulary - word elements	X	X
Evaluating sources	X	X
Outlining and mapping	X	X
Paraphrasing	X	X
Summarizing	X	X
Understanding citations	X	X
Taking reading notes	X	X
Preparing for an exam	X	
Analyzing text characteristics		X
Writing citations		X
Distinguishing fact from opinion		X
Analyzing arguments		X
Finding evidence to support one's argument		X