

TIPS FOR TEACHERS

Asking Our Own Questions: A Task-based Survey and Presentation Project

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Introduction

One issue with English education in many environments is that it can often seem anchored to a teacher or to a textbook (Dashwood, 2005) that lacks pragmatic authenticity. To address this concern, some teachers utilize task-based activities such as writing and delivering a speech or creating role play presentations because they provide “students with an opportunity to function in an autonomous context, further developing their confidence and empowering them to use English in a fulfilling and rewarding way” (Bury et al, 2012, p. 17). However, many task-based activities consist solely of a set of interview or survey questions prepared by teachers and based on their choice of topic. While students may be required to write one or two additional questions of their own, this is generally insufficient to generate a sense of ownership of the task among the students.

Furthermore, concerns about time, rigid curricula, and students’ ability to create their own surveys means that teachers often avoid task-based activities. This is unfortunate because well-designed task-based activities offer students the chance to employ the target language in a communicative manner to achieve an outcome in an authentic context (Alan and Stroller, 2005). Consequently, we introduced a task-based survey and presentation project to eleventh grade students in a private Japanese high school. The students created their own surveys on a topic of their choice, conducted the surveys through communicative data gathering, analyzed their results, wrote reports, and then delivered presentations. During the presentations, each student was assessed by both the teachers and their peers via constructive written feedback and numerical ratings. Both the instructors and students were pleasantly surprised by the positive outcomes of the project.

Procedure

The project was broken down into three stages: survey, analysis and preparation, presentation. Two lessons were allocated to each stage, for a total of six 50-minute lessons. Throughout the process, students were encouraged to work autonomously, with the teacher playing the role of facilitator or monitor so as not to limit creativity or impose too much control over the project development. A suggested plan for replicating the project follows.

Lesson One

1. [Five minutes] Inform students that they will be creating and conducting surveys and presenting their results to their peers. Then, form groups of two to three students.
2. [Five minutes] Have each group choose a survey topic. Act as a facilitator by asking questions such as these: *What do you like to do? What are you interested in? What is a big current news story and what do you think about it? What would you like to find out from other students?*
3. [Five minutes] Assist groups in narrowing their survey topic if necessary. For example, the general topic of fashion could focus on clothes shopping or on fashion brand awareness. Again, teachers act as facilitators, assisting students to consider different areas of focus within their chosen topic.
4. [Twenty-five minutes] Tell groups to draft roughly ten survey questions. Since they will be surveying their peers, structured or scaled questions are desirable. Provide examples if needed.
5. [Ten minutes] Have each group consider the best order for their questions, providing feedback as necessary.

One common issue with lessons like this is how to balance the use of L1 with a desire for use of L2 during negotiations and discussions (Carless, 2008). While L1 use may seem undesirable from a communicative perspective, it is important to remember that the goal of the project is the production of a survey in English and its subsequent presentation. Thus, negotiation in the students' L1 during brainstorming stages can ultimately contribute to L2 acquisition and development.

Lesson Two

1. [Thirty minutes] Have each group survey the others, with a target of interviewing at least ten students. If more than one class is taking part, then

the different classes should survey each other. Teachers monitor and assist as needed.

2. [Twenty minutes] Have groups begin collating and analyzing their results.

Lesson Three

[Fifty minutes] Have groups prepare the first draft of their survey reports. Provide content guidelines such as these questions:

- What was your topic?
- Why did you choose it?
- What questions did you ask?
- Who did you ask?
- How many people did you ask?
- What were your results?
- What do your results mean?

Point out that, unlike a speech, when a single student delivers a monologue, the aim here is for them to prepare group presentations. Encourage students to consider both how they can use graphs, tables, and other non-textual information to support their spoken comments and how they should organize their presentation so that each group member plays an active and balanced role. At the end of the lesson, collect the draft presentations so you can provide feedback before the next lesson. Alternatively, conduct a live feedback session with each group during the first part of the next lesson.

Lesson Four

1. [Fifteen minutes] Give each group feedback on their draft presentations and time to make necessary revisions.
2. [Thirty-five minutes] Provide time for groups to practice their presentations. Monitor and assist as needed ensuring that every member takes an active role.

Lessons Five and Six

1. Give everyone scoring sheets (see sample in the appendix) and encourage them to develop their critical thinking skills by making comments about

the group presentations and their findings. Be sure to stress the importance of providing constructive comments.

2. Have each group present their survey results to their peers. If more than one class is involved, students should present to the class that they surveyed.

Assuming each presentation takes roughly five minutes, six or seven presentations can be given during a 50-minute lesson, with sufficient time to open and close the lesson and transition between groups. Presentation length can be increased or decreased as needed based on the number of lessons the teacher can allocate to the project, lesson length, class size, and the proficiency level of the students.

Feedback from our students indicated that they overwhelmingly (over 90%) believed this project was a good way to improve their English and had a positive effect on their confidence and level of English speaking and writing skill. They also reported enjoying making and conducting both the survey and the presentation. This finding was supported by comments made by the students, including, but not limited to these: *It was fun. It was good to hear other opinions. We learned new things.* Many students commented that they *had learned about other students*, showing that an authentic learning context had been created.

Addressing the Issue of Time

It is likely that many teachers would be interested in trying this kind of student survey activity but would find it impossible to devote a full six lessons to it. While the simplest way to present the course is over a series of consecutive lessons, this is not always practical, and subsequent iterations of the project have been included in more time-constrained syllabi. The alternative plan outlined here requires the dedication of only two full lessons:

Lesson 1	Introduce the project and have groups draft their surveys.
Survey	Have student groups conduct their surveys during suitable times such as homeroom, recess, lunch, or during after-school activities.
Homework	Assign student to analyze the results.
Lesson 2	Have student groups begin to draft their presentations.
Homework	Have student groups complete their draft presentations.

Lessons 3-6 Have one or two student groups make their presentations at the beginning of subsequent lessons.

Other alternatives for conducting student surveys include during a special school event such as a culture festival, summer camp, or open house day. Finally, the whole project could be included as part of a study trip syllabus.

Conclusion

The survey and presentation project described here provides students with the opportunity to reinforce communicative skills, develop autonomy, reinforce critical thinking skills (especially while writing the surveys and presenting their results), review and revise vocabulary and grammatical points, self-evaluate their work, and engage in peer assessment. We hope that this outline provides enough information to help other teachers to develop and implement similar task-based projects with their own English language classes.

References

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Appendix

Peer Marking Sheet

The following is an example peer marking sheet for a single up to four students.

Topic: _____					
Names: _____			Names: _____		
A: _____			C: _____		
B: _____			D: _____		
	A	B		C	D
Content Score:	/5	/5	Content Score:	/5	/5
Pronunciation Score:	/5	/5	Pronunciation Score:	/5	/5
Delivery Score:	/15	/15	Delivery Score:	/15	/15
Total Score:	/25	/25	Total Score:	/25	/25
Comments: _____					

