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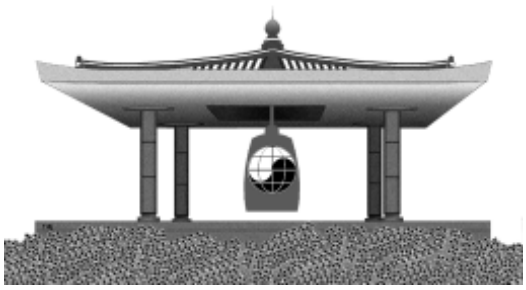

One more time, with feeling –

Bringing task recycling to the classroom

by Marc Helgesen

There is a growing interest in *language planning* – the idea of giving learners time before doing a task to think about what they want to say and how they will say it. One variation on this idea is *task repetition* or *task recycling.* In this case, rather than simply thinking through a task, learners actually do the task two or more times. It is as if each time they do, it acts as a rehearsal for the subsequent time.

In his plenary at last year's KOTESOL conference, Martin Bygate (2002) mentioned a fascinating bit of research he had done. The task was simple enough. He showed a short, animated video to a student and, when it was finished, asked her to describe what she had seen. This is not at all unlike what many of us do in class. Here's the part that is interesting. Three days later he showed her the same video and repeated the task. She had no particular preparation other than having done the task once before. The results were astounding. The second time, the

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Bringing Task Recycling to the Classroom

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student demonstrated marked improvements in vocabulary selection and use, grammar, and the ability to self-correct. (To see a transcript of what the student actually said, see Bygate 1996). Bygate (2001) suggests giving learners the opportunity to repeat language tasks as a way to make progress in accuracy, fluency and complexity. When learners redo specific activities, they are able to reuse and improve their conceptualization, formulation and articulation — or, put simply, they are clear about what they want to say, and they say it better. When they do new versions of the task within the same task framework, they become more able to deal with task variations more effectively.

Tony Lynch and Joan Maclean (2001) also advocate task repetition, which they prefer to call task recycling. In particular, they look at immediate repetition. That is, doing the same task with different partners during a given class period. They find various students improved in accurate use of grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary selection and the ability to self-correct, even though none of those elements were focused on during the task itself. They do caution that not every student makes improvement in every area. Common sense will tell us that different learners at different levels with different needs will make progress…differently! But the point is that TR seems to be a specific tool we can use to help them make progress.

But Lynch and Maclean go on to suggest what the real problem may be:

> Despite the evidence that immediate task repetition lead these learners to change and improve their spoken English, the notion of repetition as a useful classroom procedure will require some 'selling', both to our professional colleagues and to language learners. (p. 159).

My experience tells me that, once you call the learners' attention to how much easier the task was the second time, and how much more clearly they could share their ideas, the students don't take much convincing. They know their own progress when they see it. But now, how can we convince ourselves to try it?

How to bring task recycling into the classroom

Our hesitation to repeat tasks probably stems from being afraid learners will get bored and lose interest. And if the task focuses only on language and not on real communication in which the learners feel interested and invested, that is a valid concern. However, if we make sure the learners are sharing their own ideas, experiences and dreams – those things they want to talk about – the boredom problem disappears. And having more than one chance to talk about the same topic means they can share their ideas that much more effectively. The first time through a task, they often spend a lot of energy just putting together the meaning and language (the 'conceptualization, formulation and articulation' Bygate refers to). The second time they are focused more strongly on getting their meaning across.

Task recycling can be as simple as saying, "Everyone find a new partner. Do the task again."

Task recycling can be as simple as saying, "Everyone find a new partner. Do the task again." The first few times, of course, you'll want to mention the reason: *When you repeat the task, it gets easier. You communicate your meaning more clearly. Your language level goes up and you learn things from a new partner.* Of course, if the activity is something like a pairwork task where they've already filled up a page, you might want them to change parts – A's become B's and vice versa — or simply have them do the task again without writing down information.

Another easy way to recycle the information is as a *memory game*. Learners close their books and see how much of what they and their partners said they can remember. Or they join a new partner and say everything they remember that they heard from their previous partner. This can even be done at the level of vocabulary. If a lesson featured a lot of new words, have the students work in pairs to see how many they can remember. Since vocabulary learning requires meeting new vocabulary repeatedly, this is a way to make that repetition happen mentally.

The recycling can even be a silent, mental follow-up. For example, ask them, when they take the bus or train home, to spend a few minutes seeing how much of what they said during the task they can remember.

You may also want to consider recycling a task as the warm-up for the following class session. It gets the learners back in touch with the English they were working on, and starts with something familiar for a successful orientation.

Fluency Frames

Often, as a way of helping learners consolidate and build on a theme, function or topic that brings up target language points, I have my students do one of the following 'Fluency frames'. Fluency frames are simply activity frameworks. They are not limited to a particular topic, function or grammar point. Rather, they structure the interaction in a task. The teacher provides the topic to have the students work on whatever language point, function or theme you choose. In most cases, you'll want to assign topics that the learners can personalize. That makes it easier for them to come up with something to say, and more interesting for their partners. As an aspect of *language planning*, I find it very helpful to give the students two or three minutes to think about the topic, things they want to say, questions they want to ask, etc., before beginning the fluency frame task.

Three-minute conversation task

This is just as simple as it sounds. On the board I write:

> 3-minute conversation task.
>
> • Close your books.
>
> • Have a conversation.
> Talk about (whatever the topic is).
>
> • English only.

The combination of the challenge of filling up the time with that of only using English provides the support so learners can actually do this. After three minutes, they change partners and begin again with a new partner. This usually continues for two or three rounds. The time limit can, of course, be changed depending on the level and interest of your students, but you do want it long enough to be a bit challenging, yet short enough that they will be able to succeed.

Line Up

Write the topic on the board. Tell them they will discuss the topic with several partners. Tell them how much time they will have with each partner (usually one minute, 90 seconds, or two minutes) Students stand in parallel lines, facing a partner in the other line. Naturally, in large classes, there will be several lines, often following the rows of desks in a typical classroom. On your signal, they discuss the topic with their partner. After the designated time, have learners change partners. This is easily done by having each member of one line move one person forward. The first person in that line goes to the back of the line. When everyone is facing their new partner, they begin again. Continue as long as time and interest permits. Note that this is similar to the 3-minute conversation task but the interactions are shorter. Also, since students are standing, it changes the atmosphere. There is a little more pressure – positive pressure, I hope – to say a lot in a shorter time.

Out and back

When learners have created something like a project, a poster, a tour map, etc., in pairs or small groups, have them share it with members of other groups. (For this explanation, I will assume it is a project). They all take a few minutes to think about what they want to say about their project. Then one member stays with the project while the others go to different projects. The members who are at their own projects explain what they did and answer questions. Visitors stay at each project for 2-3 minutes before moving on to the next one. Each person must visit at least five different projects – so that means each has a chance to explain their own project five times.

This is very similar to the activity Lynch and MacLean describe in their article mentioned above. Theirs is called *The Poster Carousel* and was used in an English for Medical Congresses course. In it, students worked in pairs for one hour to read a research article and make a poster explaining the contents. Then partners take turns talking about the poster and answering question about it. This idea could be adapted for lower levels and for general conversation courses by replacing the research articles with items like pages from travel brochures (suggesting vacation activities), advertisements for two or three cars/computers/other items (comparatives), or other items related to the class topics.

The final two activities are less conversations than 'mini-speeches.' For both, I find it useful to give the learners about three topic choices. Each topic is related to the language we are working on but the choices give learners a chance to choose an item about which they have something to say. For example, if we are working on the function of asking for/giving permission and the grammar point of modal auxiliary verbs (must, should, have to, etc.), I assign topics like these:

- Rules I hate.
- A time I got into trouble for breaking a rule.
- If I could make a rule for this school (or a law for this country), it would be_____.

Mouth marathon

Write the topic(s) on the board.

Students work in pairs. Each speaker tries to talk about the topic for as long as possible. The partner listens and keeps time. The speaker must stop when one of two rules is broken:

(1) Do not pause for more than 5 seconds,

(2) Everything you say must be in English. If you say a word that is not English, you are out.

Once both partners have had a turn, they stand up. They find someone else who is standing. They regroup into pairs with new partners. They begin a new round. This continues for about three rounds.

They get one point if they are able to speak longer than they did the previous time. This means, of course, that both members of the new pair can become winners. Indeed, everyone in the class could a winner. They are competing with themselves, not each other.

Because of the 5-second limit, it is rare for anyone to speak longer than three minutes.

Fluency workshop

Write the topic(s) on the board. Learners work in pairs.

One member of each pair speaks about the topic for exactly two minutes. The other member listens. The listener then must ask at least one question. Then the second student – the listener the first time – speaks for two minutes. The partner listens and follows-up with a question.

Everyone changes partners. Round two is a repeat of the first round, except that the time is cut to 90-seconds. Students say essentially the same thing they did the first time, but since they've done it once, it is usually faster and smoother the second time.

Learners change partners again and do round three. In this round, the speaking time is 75 seconds.

The entire activity usually takes 25-30 minutes. The actual speaking time can be changed to meet your students' needs and abilities, but the 120/90/75-second time ration seems to work well with most students.

... it can help learners work on fluency, complexity and accuracy.

Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to present a rationale for Task Recycling and to expand our teaching repertoire by suggesting ways to implement it in the classroom, both by adapting textbook tasks and through the use of *fluency frames*. TR can be a useful tool in the classroom. Like other types of *language planning*, it can help learners work on fluency, complexity and accuracy.

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Bringing Task Recycling to the Classroom

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Fluency: They've done it once, so the next time is smoother.

Complexity: They've done it once, so the next time it can have more depth.

Accuracy: They've already done this once, so they can often say it better.

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Note

I learned Line Up from Carl Adams, Mouth Marathon from L.A. Meagher and Fluency Workshop from Keith Maurice. Thanks to Steve Brown and Keiko Sugiyama for feedback on earlier versions of this article.

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Reviews of books and teaching materials should be 400-800 words in length. Submissions should be of recent publications and not previously reviewed in *The English Connection.*

Calendar submissions should be less than 150 words for conferences and calls for papers, less than 50 words for events. Submissions should have wide appeal among ESL/EFL practitioners in the East Asian setting.

Your submission should follow APA (American Psychological Association) guidelines for source citations and should include a biographical statement of up to 40 words.

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