IDEA SHARING: TASKS THAT WORK
IN THE THAI CLASSROOM

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Having accumulated a wealth of EFL and ESP experience teaching in Europe for almost two decades, as well as experience of curriculum, course and exam design, implementation, and materials writing, it is perhaps not surprising that I considered myself fairly well prepared for teaching in Thailand when I arrived in the country two years ago. But how very wrong I was!

In fact, I discovered that much about my approach to the EFL classroom, which had more or less worked in multi-national and Italian classrooms, was not appropriate to my teaching situation in Thailand, and that it was brutally necessary to adapt. While I am unable to go into any general questions about the particularities of Thai classrooms here, what follows is a description of a few activities which are the fruits of this adaptation, and have worked for me.

Task One
Getting the writing going: cultivating critical thinking in essay writing for first year university students

Context: Chulalongkorn University first year students, faculties of engineering and commerce (two different classes) foundation English essay writing: cause and effect; expressing an opinion.

When first year undergraduates at the university face the task of writing an essay in English in their Foundation English class, it poses a tremendous challenge. I believe this is primarily because the students are unfamiliar with the genre of an essay in English, largely having had to deal with grammar and reading for much of their English studies at school up until that point. It is understandable, then, that the task which faces the Foundation English teacher in teaching the skill of essay writing, is a fairly daunting one!

The following activity seems to foster a critical, analytical approach to writing within the supportive framework of group work. Working in a group in this way allows the students to share their ideas, show their work to others, and comment on each others' writing. It also enables students to start to think about the strengths and weaknesses of their own and others' writing in a brisk-paced, fun setting.

One common problem in the teaching of essay writing in the language classroom is one of the teacher finding time to work with each individual writer. The following activity is one way to deal with this difficulty. While the students are actively engaged in working together, the teacher is able to circulate, intervene unobtrusively, and observe the process from the outside. It also allows the teacher to take note of the students' individual and collective problems which can be selectively addressed at a later point.

1) T explains SS are going to do some free writing in which they express their opinions. T asks SS to sit in groups of 6-8, in circles.
2) SS write down three different topics, without communicating to friends.

3) T asks SS to put their nickname on the page.
4) T asks SS to select one topic, without telling choice to others in group, and to write this topic at the top of a new A4 page.
5) Each S passes this new page to the person on their left.
6) T explains SS will begin writing shortly, and that they must leave one blank line between each line of writing.
7) SS now have 10 minutes (time allowance can change) to write as much as possible on the topic. T times writing session.
8) After 10 minutes, each person passes their piece to the person on their left.
9) T tells SS they are going to read their friends' piece, and then write a comment. This comment must not simply be *'Good,'* or *'Well done;'* but involve some critical thought about the writing content, organization, etc.
10) The next person reads the piece, and writes a critical, analytical comment, for example: *Well written. The ending is a bit unclear – you could have said 'Although.....'*
11) The pieces of writing are then passed around the whole circle, collecting a series of comments, eventually ending up in the original writer's hands.
12) The original writer reads all the comments, and then contributes to a short, informal group chat which begins: *'Thanks for your comments, Somchai. I found it difficult to write the ending, so what you say has helped me to think about how I could do it better by starting with.....'* The next writer speaks...and so on.

Initially, the free writing session in groups appears to be a powerful and effective 'kick-start' tool to help learners actually get going with the essay writing, while later this task acts as a springboard from which the learners can feel more confident about diving off into the more isolated waters of individual essay writing.

Task Two
Fluency practice, confidence building: Question time in presentations

Context: Government department, presentation training. Class has already covered language of how to round off presentations and lead on to question time.   SS have also studied ways of answering questions, and the appropriate body of language involved in this part of presentations.

Language focus: Question time at end of a presentation.

Task type: Fluency practice in a small group context.

Objectives: To build confidence in dealing with questions coming from the floor after a presentation.

Background: Giving a presentation is perhaps one of the more challenging tasks for language learners; my Thai learners were not exempt from this! This task allows the students to work closely together, supporting each other through what is perhaps the toughest part of a presentation i.e. question time at the end. In this task, students are exposed to a large number of fast-paced questions for which they are not prepared.   This lack of preparation is useful because often, learners tend to rely heavily on written, prepared answers to 'anticipated' questions during question time. This makes responding to the audience's questions in a natural way difficult. Through this task, the students are provided with the opportunity to practice handling questions in a fluid, brisk-paced way, with the support of their classmates. As the teacher intervenes very little, the students often find that, despite difficulties with fluency and pace, they can develop this question-fielding skill without the teacher's help.   Indeed, in the classrooms where I have taught this task, the students have been pleasantly surprised by the extent to which they found the appropriate language to respond efficiently and effectively to the questions, with no prepared answers.   The task is also useful in terms of question asking by allowing learners to put themselves in the audiences' place and form questions, also with little preparation.

Description of task:

1) T tells each S to write last line or two of their (or an imaginary) presentation, leading on to question time.
2) T helps SS with wording, grammar etc.
3) SS take their final sentence/s and sit in group(s) -- about 6-8 SS per group, in a close circle (the seating arrangement is important: the SS should be sitting as close to each other as is culturally and practically allowed), with microphone.
4) SS take it in turns to say their endings and then invite questions from the audience. The other SS take it in turns to ask questions, keeping the pace up (this is important: T may need to facilitate the briskness here by encouragement and prompting where necessary).
5) T makes sure SS do not give very short answers, e.g. '*Yes*,' or '*Not really.*'   T also helps SS who are in difficulty with either questions or answers by providing phrases or words to prompt them.
6) T however, primarily encourages SS to do this for each other, so that the group is self-sufficient and does not depend on T interference.
7) After task is finished, whole class comes back together (I use a large circle arrangement where possible). T asks SS to give feedback about task. T may also ask SS to reflect on why/why not the task was helpful, and in what ways they think this kind of practice can help the SS improve their language skills, etc.

Task Three
Merging articles with abstracts: Journal article abstracts and grammar articles in a research institute staff classroom

Context: Research teaching staff at a university research institute. The course, which was called 'Professional Writing', aimed to improve the students' knowledge of different types of academic research writing, namely, journal articles, M.A. dissertations and research proposals. The teaching approach involved a comparative analysis of these genres, by critically

examining some of their key features. e.g., 'the abstract', 'the introduction', 'the methodology section'. In this learning situation, the SS were already relatively expert at academic research writing at doctoral and post-doctoral level in their own discipline. What therefore was important was to introduce them to strategies which could help then expand and hone their already considerable writing and (to a lesser extent) reading skills.

One area of grammatical weakness which soon became clear to me, concerned the use of the definite/indefinite articles a/an/the. I developed[1] a task which demanded some understanding of an abstract while also testing grammar articles. I was somewhat apprehensive about merging the two (I felt it may well stress the SS with two very different cognitive loads); however, the task was successful in that the SS seemed to be actively engaged and purposefully communicating during the task. Moreover, at the end they expressed enthusiasm about doing more work of a similar nature in the future.

Lesson description: SS learn about the place and purpose of an academic journal article abstract. SS practice use of grammar articles a/an/the within context of defining an 'abstract.'

1) T brainstorms SS for key elements of an academic journal article abstract.
2) T writes SS' suggestions up on board.
3) T ensures that SS understand both the purpose and place of an abstract. T elicits from/tells SS:
    - an academic journal abstract is found at the beginning of the article
    - the abstract provides a brief version of the article itself; however, it is not a summary of the article
4) T elicits from/tells SS that an abstract normally includes following elements:
    - aims of study
    - focus of study

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[1] This Activity is based on a taks originally suggested to me by Ajarn Eurmporn Chootidamrongpan of CULI

        ■   locating study in literature (also termed background /context)

        ■   tensions within and/or gaps in the literature which the study will attempt to address/investigate

        ■   methods adopted in collecting data

        ■   findings of study

        ■   implications of findings, including possible applications and future research

5) Class discusses these points and T checks understanding as far as is possible.

6) T gives SS worksheet with gaps (see Appendix) and tells SS to skim across piece.

7) Tasks SS what piece is about, T also checks everyone is clear about content of piece.

8) SS work together in small groups or pairs, reading through and discussing answers.

9) T circulates, offering support where necessary.

10) T brings class back together and asks SS to take it in turns to read through piece out loud/T elicits answers.

11) This process can include some useful discussion about the use of (grammatical) articles, whilst enhancing learner awareness of the function and organization of an academic journal article.

12) T give SS complete, correct version of worksheet so that SS can refer to correct version if needed.

As a follow up series of lessons leading on from this one, I gave SS a number of journal abstracts from journals in different disciplines to their own, which we then discussed in class. Sifting through the different textures, structures, and also content of the abstracts allowed my SS to gain an insight into the basic building blocks that are the essence of a journal abstract.

On reflection I notice that the three activities outlined in this piece have elements in common.

Firstly, all the activities, which the students considered rather difficult, are presented, particularly at the outset, in a relatively undemanding way. In activities 1 and 2 this softly-softly approach is realized both by the students having their peers as

their interlocutors and by leaving the initial tasks rather ill defined; while Activity 3 starts with a brain storming session where the 'success' of the individual student's contribution is fairly indistinct which also keeps 'failure' at bay.

I suppose starting in these relatively non-threatening ways enables the students, making it easier for them to speak later on in the class and thus renders the 'communicative method' more effective.

Secondly, and closely related to the first point, the extensive use of group work throughout the three activities subjects the students to peer criticism mostly, while the teacher's role is less critical and intimidating than usual, mainly being that of consultant and monitor. This too seems to make the students feel more relaxed about speaking and avoids the frosty, silent classrooms, which characterized much of my early teacher-led Thai classroom experience.

I would like to conclude this piece with the disconcerting thought that while these activities worked well in the classroom, beyond hunch and surmise, I am simply a too inexperienced teacher with Thai learners to KNOW why they did so. Consequently, if you, PASAA readers have any insights or suggestions for improvements they would be most welcome. I may be contacted at the following email address: hisaacs1960@yahoo.co.uk or at Chulalongkorn University Language Institute.

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Appendix
Abstracts: Abstract facts

Instruction: *There is an article (a, an, the) missing from each of the numbered spaces below. Read the piece, and then decide which article is missing. Can you say why?*

Abstracts are found at 1._____ beginning of journal articles, research papers, reports, theses, and dissertations. 2._____ abstract is 3._____ complete but concise and informative account of your work, i.e., 4._____ condensation that makes sense without reference to 5._____ full document. It is not merely 6._____ descriptive guide to 7._____ paper's content, it is 8._____ abbreviated version of 9._____ paper (except for very long review-style papers or monographs, in which descriptive abstracts may be used).

- The purposes of writing 10._____ abstract are: 1). To enable readers to quickly and accurately identify 11._____ substance of your work and to decide its relevance to their own interests. 2). To advertise your work (to encourage readers to obtain and read 12._____ full article, and to be available on searchable online abstract databases).

- 13._____ abstract is not 14._____ summary. 15._____ summary appears at 16._____ end of 17._____ piece of work, and is 18._____ restatement of 19._____ important findings and conclusions. Unlike 20._____ abstract, 21._____ summary does not include condensations of any other portions including 22._____ background, purpose, or methods of 23._____ study.

- With 24._____ phenomenon of information overload, many researchers will read only 25._____ abstract of your paper.

- With 26._____ advent of abstract databases, many readers will see your abstract separately from 27._____ rest of 28._____ paper. Therefore, writing 29._____ excellent abstract is

vital to encourage readers to obtain 30._____ full
paper, read it, and cite it.

* 31._____ essential elements of 32._____
structure   of   33._____   abstract   are
34._____   background,   35._____
problem, 36._____.

Key

Abstract facts

Abstracts are found at the beginning of journal articles, research papers, reports, theses, and dissertations.

- An abstract is a complete but concise and information account of your work, i.e., a condensation that makes sense without reference to the full document. It is not merely a descriptive guide to the paper's content, it is an abbreviated version of the paper (except for very long review-style papers or monographs, in which descriptive abstracts may be used).

- The purposes of writing an abstract are: 1. To enable readers to quickly and accurately identify the substance of your work and to decide its relevance to their own interests. 2. To advertise your work (to encourage readers to obtain and read the full article, and to be available on searchable online abstract databases).

- An abstract is not a summary. A summary appears at the end of a piece of work, and is a restatement of the important findings and conclusions. Unlike the abstract, the summary does not include condensations of any other portions including the background, purpose, or methods of the study.

- With the phenomenon of information overload, many researchers will read only the abstract of your paper.

- With the advent of abstract databases, many readers will see your abstract separately from the rest of the paper. Therefore, writing an excellent abstract is vital to encourage readers to obtain the full paper, read it, and cite it.

- The essential elements of the structure of an abstract are the background, the problem, the methods, the results, and the implications.

*Adapted from: "Down to Earth" Research Advice (www.earthresarch.com)