The Journal of Language Teaching and Learning, 2012 2 (1), 33-44.

Promoting Productive Language Skills through the Use of Learner-Generated Surveys

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Abstract

Learner autonomy and critical thinking skills seem to be essential learning attainments for foreign language learners. As an attempt to integrate these with the productive language skills, this study outlines a three-week project carried out to discover how class surveys designed by learners themselves contribute to the development of writing and speaking skills of a group of elementary EFL learners in a state school (n=24). In groups of six, the learners followed a number of steps ranging from group formation to task allocation and from peer correction to self-evaluation. These steps gradually helped each group build a survey on a chosen topic, administer it to peers, analyse and report the results, and evaluate the overall process and the video-recorded presentations, thereby giving the group the chance to account for a real-life problem. It was observed that learner-generated surveys significantly facilitated the development of writing and speaking skills. The process of preparing the questions, editing them and commenting on the results broadened the students' horizons. Despite these valuable contributions, some problems pertaining to affective domain emerged. That is, during these task-based lessons, emergence of such restricting affective factors as the fear of being observed or the challenge to express oneself in front of others seemed to persist. In the light of these observations, this study not only provides the reader with strong points of such instruction, but also makes some suggestions for possible solutions to the aforementioned problems that may persist in prospective in-class practices.

Keywords: Learner-generated surveys, productive language skills, project-based learning, learner autonomy

1. Introduction

Learner-generated surveys prove useful tools in that they enable learners to focus on all four macro language skills if handled in a task-based fashion. These tools are useful because they provide learners with the opportunity to be involved in genuine communication. That is, most learners often do not want to talk about or listen to things about strangers. However, most listening activities in current textbooks concentrate on irrelevant information about strangers, their lives, hobbies, dislikes and so on. Learners would rather hear or talk about things which address their own feelings and ideas. Thus, learner-generated surveys offer much to learners who like to learn almost everything about their classmates and teachers. In this respect, a survey can be seen as a written form of "gossip". If learners talk or write about something they like, they are enthusiastic about whatever they do

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regarding it. Therefore, it is assumed that utilising learner-generated surveys is a novel way of getting learners to write and talk.

During the design, administration, presentation and evaluation process of a learner survey, a great deal of negotiation on the content, structural points or vocabulary items takes place though a significant portion of this negotiation occurs in L1. Whether in L2 or L1, negotiation about a particular language item helps learners internalize it by promoting retention, and aptly planned lessons carried out in a task-based format help learners express themselves. This study, therefore, outlines one such task-based learning environment where 24 elementary learners prepared their own materials and presented them in front of the class. Presentations were followed by self and peer-evaluation of the whole task and the end products. The following sections present the details of how the learners went about producing, presenting and evaluating surveys on various topics and how the teacher guided them throughout the process.

2. Background to the Study

To promote communicative skills, learner-generated surveys are of great help for learners as asserted by Alan and Stroller (2005), Kagnarith, Theara, and Klein (2007), and Harmer (1998). Ranging from brainstorming to the construction of the surveys and presentation of the results, various steps helped the learners to improve their speaking and writing skills. In this study, surveying was put into practice in the form of a task-based project, inspired by Larsen-Freeman's (2000) words that task-based instruction "aims at providing learners with a natural context for language use" (p. 144). Regarding the essence of this study, two important concepts are central: task-based language learning and learner-generated surveys. These concepts are shortly outlined below.

2.1. Task-based Language Instruction

Willis and Willis (2001) state that after the term *communicative competence*, which refers to effective use of the target language in communicative contexts, was introduced in the 1970s, methodologists began to consider student needs and interests for language use in the classroom. They believed that teaching learners grammatical items in a linear fashion did not promise much success in terms of communicative goals. This paradigm shift brought forth a new approach called the communicative approach to foreign language instruction (Willis & Willis, 2001, p. 174). With the introduction of this new approach to foreign language teaching, methodologists began to seek ways to make language teaching more communicative. This resulted in the emergence of another approach, which is referred to as task-based language teaching.

The word task, in the broadest sense, is used to refer to almost any activity carried out by a student in a language classroom; however, what we call a task in task-based language learning is different from this popular use. In this context, Nunan's (1993) definition of a communicative task is "a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form" (p. 10). Similarly, Willis (1996) defines tasks as "activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome" (p. 23). Upon having a look at these definitions, we easily recognize that the definitions have two common points: meaning and outcome.

As for the term task-based instruction, Richards and Rodgers (2001) defined it as "an approach based on the use of tasks as the core unit of planning and instruction in language teaching" (p. 223). As it is understood from this definition, task-based instruction involves both actual classroom teaching and syllabus design. It involves a series of tasks to be carried out. That is, learners carry out a particular task to exchange meanings; thus, the task has an outcome. Meanings can be exchanged in oral or written language. For instance, a group of students can be asked to give instructions to solve a problem or entertain one another with episodes (Willis & Willis, 2001, p. 273).

In addition to having an outcome, according to Willis (1996), tasks should be carried out in a given period of time, and they must be goal-oriented. Meaning must be emphasised over form in a task. In other words, when we are carrying out a task, students should have the chance to express themselves using any language form. If form is emphasised in an activity, this activity becomes a controlled practice, which is generally seen in form-focused or structural approaches.

Beglar and Hunt (2002) stress the importance of self-assessment on the part of the learners in task-based approaches. In their opinion, one of the most salient characteristics of task-based approaches is to activate student's meta-cognitive abilities to what is being learned and what is not. Involving oneself in self-evaluation is the initial step in understanding one's own weak and strong sides. Remedial work must follow this diagnostic period so as to deal with all those weaknesses. This cycle obviously results in learners' taking responsibility of their own learning.

Proponents of task-based language teaching such as Nunan (1993) and Willis (1996) reveal that there are basically three phases in task-based language teaching: pre-task, task cycle, and language focus. The first phase presents the subject and task. By doing so, it gives learners the chance to retrieve what they already possess in their minds related to the topic (Willis, 1996). In this phase, the teacher can conduct a number of activities to activate learners' linguistic and topical knowledge. The second one, the task cycle, as Willis (1996) points out, gives students the opportunity to make use of the language they already possess to perform the given task. The task cycle phase consists of three distinct stages: task, planning, and report. After students carry out the task, the planning stage at which they plan how they will go about reporting what and how they did gives them the chance to communicate in the target language. Then students present a report of their experiences. The task cycle generally takes place outside the classroom, and it makes learners use all four language skills. The third phase, language focus, offers students the chance to play with the forms of the target language. As noted earlier, during the first two phases of task-based instruction framework, language forms are not studied on the grounds that a direct focus on form results in deviation from the most striking feature of task-based instruction, which is communication. In this phase, students examine their own work, and the teacher provides them with valuable advice and feedback.

There may be some problems regarding the implementation of a task-based lesson. Carless (2002) examined how task-based instruction worked in classes where young learners studied English. He set forth several problems with the implementation process. To name a few,

(1) Large class sizes
(2) Cramped classrooms
(3) Lack of appropriate resources
(4) Untrained teachers in task-based methodologies
(5) Teachers with limited language proficiency
(6) Traditional examination-based syllabuses

Despite the problems mentioned above, task-based language teaching has strong sides. For example, Richards and Rodgers (2001) stress that students are given the chance to have input and output processing through tasks. Moreover, the sense of achievement in tasks motivates learners. Task difficulty can also be altered in connection with certain pedagogical goals. However, it is rather difficult to arrange tasks so as not to cause chaos in the classroom because the level of the tasks and the student profile are two crucial points to keep in mind when selecting and sequencing tasks. Building upon the information about task-based instruction, the next section covers learner-generated surveys since this study is carried out by the integration these concepts.

2.2. Learner-generated Surveys

Kagnarith et al., (2007) note that producing surveys as teaching materials is a common activity in textbooks. They see questionnaire writing as a "well-established technique for facilitating different forms of communication in the classroom" (p. 3). They have the following to say about the value of questionnaire projects as a task-based activity with a lot of communicative intent:

Numerous task-based projects are available to teachers who wish to teach a second language (L2) by involving their students in real-world, interesting activities that will expose them to a large amount of authentic language. One example is a questionnaire project, which is an excellent way to integrate language and other skills within a task-based activity. With a questionnaire project, students advance through stages of creating questions, collecting data, and analysing and reporting results while developing their L2 skills through brainstorming, research, writing, problem solving, and group work (p. 2).

Through the development of surveys, learners not only practice language skills, but they also integrate critical thinking processes into this practice, thereby being more autonomous. According to Harmer (1998), being planned beforehand, learner-prepared questionnaires stimulate communication because both sides; that is, the surveyor and the surveyed, possess something to tell the other side. Moreover, they help some grammatical points to be revised without focusing on form. The data collected by means of questionnaires can function as the departure point for communicative activities and written work. Kagnarith et al.'s (2007) project involved designing questionnaires by advanced learners in an ELT context, so the steps in the questionnaire design process were more or less scientific in nature. It helped the learners to learn the conventions of questionnaire design including piloting.

Alan and Stroller (2005) report a project in which learners in an EFL context did research about the value of the local tramcar system in Eskişehir, Turkey. They conducted some interviews and reported the results to the authorities by a letter and to the learners at the university through a bulletin board. Throughout this project, the learners used more advanced techniques to gather information like interviewing, surveying, and library or web research. The researchers set realistic goals to be achieved at the end of the study. They report that the learners felt more self-confident using the language at the end of the project in addition to being involved in critical thinking. Implemented in a similar fashion, this study builds on the data gathered from the studies cited above.

3. The Survey Project

Task-based language learning was integrated with surveys in this study. In the overall scale, the survey project facilitated the use of four macro skills, yet mainly writing and speaking. Both of these skills were naturally stressed at almost every step of the task. To develop writing skills, the learners were asked to prepare lists of words before producing the survey items, to formulate their ideas in short sentences in forms of survey items, and to write their speculations on the results of the survey that they prepared in the form of individual sentences or short paragraphs.

As for the speaking skill, the learners tried to communicate in English at almost every stage of the task though certain amount of L1 use was inevitable. In addition to promoting these skills, the project outlined below helped the learners think critically, gain autonomy, utilise a range of meta-cognitive strategies under the headings "planning, monitoring and evaluation" and also develop their public speaking skills though this was limited to group presenters. It was fortunate that almost none of the aforementioned problems listed by Carless (2002) were faced during the implementation of the task-based lesson despite the existence of some others. How the researchers went about doing the project and managed to overcome possible problems is explained in detail in the following sections.

3.1. Phases in the Project

Various steps were involved in the design, administration, evaluation, and presentation processes. Each of these steps contained a lot of student-to-student and teacher-to-student and student-to-teacher interaction. The steps were as follows:
   (1) Forming groups and choosing broad topics for these groups
   (2) Brainstorming about the topics

(3) Writing the first draft and proofreading (Feedback on errors and the points that can be improved) (See Appendix for a sample first draft.)

(4) Learners' revising the items in the question pool (in groups) under the guidance of the teacher

(5) Further feedback by the teacher

(6) Learners' revising the items in the question pool (in groups) for the second time.

(7) Administration of the questionnaire

(8) Statistical analysis of the learner surveys (descriptive statistics only)

(9) Writing the first draft of the reports with statistical data presentation tools like tables and graphs

(10) Proofreading of the reports (Feedback on the written reports)

(11) Learners' revising the reports under the guidance of the teacher

(12) Oral presentation of the results in groups

(13) Record-view-comment (Video-recording the presentations followed by a discussion about the data presented and the project itself after watching the presentations)

During the production of the questions in the surveys, a cycle of revising and feedback was used as a reflection of "process model" in teaching writing. In all the steps, the learners mostly worked autonomously and were involved in reflective learning. The tasks themselves were meaningful because they involved problem-solving. That is, each group was instructed to write several research questions about the topic being studied. For instance, the group which studied "sports" formed research questions like "What is the place of sports in our life?" "Do people understand the importance of sports for health?" "How can we solve problems related to the place of sports in our lives?" All the questions in the survey centred on these main research questions, and the solutions to problems were advisory in nature since the learners were not in a position to find out genuine solutions for the problems faced by the community.

3.1.1. Group Formation

24 elementary learners with an age range between 14 and 17 participated in this study. 10 of these learners were males and 14 were females. These limited English proficient learners were familiar with several English tenses and basic English vocabulary. At the beginning of the study, they were asked to form groups of six, and each of them was given responsibilities in the group. One person in the group was the chairperson, and another was the spokesperson, while the others were group members with various responsibilities ranging from grammar leadership to coordinating leadership. The purpose of such allocation of tasks was to motivate the learners through a sense of responsibility. Moreover, one reason why the learners were asked to fulfil their tasks in groups was the assumption that they are ready to communicate with their peers if provided with right conditions, and that certain level of peer encouragement can take place in a relaxed atmosphere.

3.1.2. Brainstorming

The learners were given a list of words containing ten broad topics such as music, culture, technology, and so on. In groups of six, they were asked to add more to the list, and the resulting product was a long list of words. Working together in groups of six, learners chose the topic they want to work on and gave reasons why they had chosen that particular topic. This phase of the project actually formed the first cycle of interaction among group members.

Six of these topics were chosen by the groups, which gave themselves names such as "Bulls" or "Crazy Girls". The topics chosen from the list of the topics produced through brainstorming were technology, food and drinks, sports, holidays, and tourism. The next step was to brainstorm and write all the things that the students thought about the topics they had chosen. The purpose of this step was

to broaden their horizons and to activate their background information about the topic under scrutiny. Such a brainstorming session helped the learners to formulate their ideas in the form of survey items.

3.1.3. Constructing the Surveys in the Form of Question Pools

The lists of words that were prepared during the brainstorming stage were the bases of the questions constructed by the group members individually first, and in groups later. They were asked to discuss the quality and grammatical accuracy of their questions in L2 though some of the interaction among group members was inevitably in L1 (in this case Turkish). Various question types were used such as structured questions and scaled questions; the question "Have you ever broken a part of your body while doing sports?" could be seen an instance of the former, while a possible example for the latter would be the question "How often do you do sports?" with a five-point scale ranging from "always" to "never". In addition to these, questions with alternatives were also favoured. It should be noted that structured or scaled questions rather than open-ended questions were encouraged because respondents with limited proficiency in L2 often have difficulty in understanding or responding to open-ended questions.

Learners were encouraged to play with the language as far as their language proficiency allowed. However, this does not mean that fluency and creativity were promoted at the expense of accuracy because a cycle of production, revision, and reformulation was followed during the process of generating the questions. Functioning as a guide, the teacher checked the question pools and provided learners with some guidance on both content and grammar.

When the students were proofreading and revising their questionnaires and reports, they behaved in a self-regulated manner. This is because the instructor mostly did not correct the mistakes overtly to make the learners aware of what they had done. To facilitate discussion among the group members and to raise awareness on the grammatical properties of the questions, the teacher wrote some symbols and words regarding the mistakes or errors in the questions (See Table 1). The learners were asked to recheck the questions under the guidance of the feedback provided through symbols.

Table 1. Words, Symbols or Abbreviations for Error Correction

Item	Meaning
WW	Wrong word choice
Spelling	Spelling mistake or error
R	Revise this sentence
PA	Pronoun agreement error
CAP	Capitalization error
Sing-Plu	An error regarding singularity or plurality
Delete	Consider deleting this item.
SVA	Subject-verb agreement error
Sth. missing	An element of the sentence is missing here.

Some questions, in Kagnarith *et al.*,'s (2007) words, "introduced the local context into the classroom" (p.3) because they were about the elements of the local culture. For example, one such question, "Have you ever eaten Testi Kebap?" justified the words above on the grounds that this particular dish is one of the most prominent elements of the local cuisine.

The learners were asked to write items with the following characteristics: (1) simple and understandable in nature (2) somehow related to the general topic or research question(s) (3) having different formats such as Yes/No questions or statements followed by a rating scale. Though the students were provided with some general guidelines on how to write the items, many other decisions were left to them as Alan and Stroller (2005) warn teachers who want to carry out projects not to limit student creativity by imposing too much control over the steps of the project. They also advise

creating environments in which learners support one another and learn from peers (p. 11). In this respect, providing guidance and feedback did not mean strictly controlling what the learners were doing in each step. Therefore, though a general framework was provided, the learners were expected to learn from each other and make some decisions about the details of each step in the survey design process. This obviously contributed to their autonomy.

3.1.4. Administering the Surveys

The learners were asked to administer the surveys to their classmates, friends from other classes and even to some teachers who knew English. One problem was that some of the students at school were not willing to answer the questions, and still some others who were willing had difficulties comprehending the questions since their overall language level was elementary. This difficulty was eliminated by providing oral Turkish translations of the sentences in the surveys by the learners who administered the questionnaire. In this way, translation as a useful tool in understanding complex sentences was used to facilitate learners' understanding of the items in the surveys.

3.1.5. Reports and Presentations

The learners were asked to write short reports giving some details of the data collected through the surveys. Each group prepared a PowerPoint presentation to present the results to the rest of the class. Though some learners had weak computer skills, they managed to prepare the presentations with the help of the guidance provided by the instructor and peers. These PowerPoint presentations mostly consisted of graphs, tables, and other non-text information along with short paragraphs or individual sentences. These sentences either presented the findings or contained some comments on the findings. The learners were asked to make some comments about the findings, thereby involved in critical thinking.

3.1.6. Feedback

While the learners were presenting the results of the questionnaires, their performances were recorded for small-scale class discussion and feedback sessions. That is, in order to provide the learners with the opportunity to evaluate the project experience, the presentations were recorded and the learners watched the recordings commenting both on the language and the experience itself. This not only enabled the learners to see their mistakes, but also helped them to talk about what they did and how they felt about it. The language used in the commenting activity was naturally simple, but it showed how motivated the learners felt.

The learners were also asked some questions either about the content or some grammatical issues. These questions actually helped them be aware of the language used in the presentations. For example, finding all the verbs in a presentation and identifying their tenses, underlining and classifying questions formulated in the presentations (as analysis) and filling in the blanks in the sentences provided by the teacher based on the presentations (as practice). The learners were encouraged to express further opinions and make comments about particular items in the surveys. They were also asked to peer evaluate the presentations in terms organisation, accuracy, and graphical properties.

4. Findings and Discussions

Being an authentic experience in itself, this study provided the learners with a number of opportunities: The project (1) reinforced certain communicative skills, (2) developed learner autonomy because the learners created their own materials and they studied on them, (3) reinforced the learners' critical thinking skills especially during the process of writing the surveys and reports, (4) enabled learners to revise the grammatical points they have learned so far through proofreading, (5) facilitated

the development of the four macro skills, especially writing and speaking, (6) gave the learners the chance to self-evaluate their work, and finally (7) sustained the interest of the students due to being authentic.

According to Alan and Stroller (2005), outcomes of a successful project are "authenticity of experience, improved language and content knowledge, increased meta-cognitive awareness, enhanced critical thinking and decision-making abilities, intensity of motivation and engagement, improved social skills, and a familiarity with target language resources" (pp. 11-12). Most of these outcomes are readily seen in this project. That is, learners felt motivated especially when they were told that they were going to be responsible for their choices, and it was the learners themselves who were to follow the steps in the project and report the results in front of the class. They used some meta-cognitive strategies pertaining to planning, monitoring and evaluation. Critical thinking was integrated into the project through small-scale research and group discussion on what to do, and how to correct mistakes or errors in the survey items or reports.

During the presentations learners were not corrected in order not to focus on form, as task-based language learning entails natural use of language skills. The learners were able to check how they presented their reports since the presentations were video-recorded and watched altogether. When viewing the recorded presentations, the students not only commented on their own work but also on the presentations by others. Considering all these positive points, making this kind of classroom presentation is considered to be valuable in developing public speaking skills. Such presentation skills are also vital in terms of building learners' self-confidence.

In spite of all these positive sides of this project, some problems persisted throughout the study. One of these problems was how to balance the use of L1 during negotiations and discussions. This problem is often expressed as a challenge in task-based language instruction. For example, Carless (2008) reported that the use of L1 was identified as a key challenge in the task-based language classroom by the educators and teachers in Hong Kong. The informants also complained that the answers to questions were minimal, often containing only one or two words. Similar problems were observed during the presentations in this task-based project. From a form-focused viewpoint, negotiation about the structural elements in the questions or reports in L1, gives learners to internalize the structures in the written products after much discussion even in L1. Though it seems to be undesirable from a communicative perspective, negotiation in L1 contributes a lot to grammatical development as far as they learn by negotiating possible cures for grammatically ill-formed sentences.

Another point that caused serious difficulties was related to the production of recorded presentation. The video camera should be of high-quality enough to record the sound from a certain distance. In this respect, the quality of sound was good enough in the project. A cautionary advice here would be that the lack of a video camera with an inbuilt option for recording high quality sound, video and sound editing operations may be difficult for some teachers. In such a situation, the teacher may opt for skipping the record-view-comment phase, which, however, may reduce the overall value of the project.

Still another challenge was that the learners had difficulty in presenting the reports in front of the class because they were well aware of the fact that they were being not only watched by their peers but also being recorded. The fact that they were being video-recorded made them more nervous than ever. Perhaps, it would have been better not to tell the learners that the presentations were being recorded. The students might have felt less uneasy in that case. Moreover, the participants or listeners from the groups other than the presenter's sometimes had difficulty in understanding some sentences and vocabulary items largely due to the fact that they did not participate in the questionnaire formation process of the other groups.

Some learners remained silent although the presenters were advised to direct the same questions to some of the learners in the classroom as if they were administering the questionnaire again. As our observations told us, two reasons accounted for the low-level participation on the part of the learners. The first is that there were some unknown key vocabulary items in the presented material. Second, the person who was asked to answer a particular question often felt nervous; therefore, could not answer

the question properly. To get rid of such a problem, perhaps the teacher can examine the presentations beforehand and can identify some difficult key vocabulary items and teach them.

5. Conclusions

An instructional activity can be considered successful if it aids to develop communicative skills. Though it is difficult to design instructional activities that promote communication among learners at elementary level, learner-generated surveys if handled in a task-based lesson format have more to add to the purpose of how to make a lesson communicative. It is little wonder why such a group work requires student collaboration; in other words, learners have to work together almost in all steps of the task. Taking the challenges as a point of departure, it is possible to conclude that such projects are likely to provide more fruitful results if they are implemented at higher levels since limitations pertaining to natural communication are more apparent at lower ones. Carless (2008) warns that "unfamiliarity with the topic, lack of planning time, or cognitive complexity may trigger mother tongue use (p. 337). Therefore, these issues should be considered. Moreover, there is need for more research on how to increase the use of target language in the class.

In a project like this, learners use their potentials to the best because they are, according to Alan and Stroller (2005), "actively engaged in information gathering, processing, and reporting over a period of time (p. 10). Throughout the survey construction process, they had to think critically and take decisions regarding quite a few points ranging from what topic to choose and what questions to prepare to how to evaluate the findings and how to report them. They self-evaluated the written and spoken products, thereby developing their judging skills. This contributed much to their autonomy and independence. In addition to all these, the learners, even those who were technophobic, developed their computer literacy which makes language learners more competent in language learning by using technology. Being process-based in its nature, this project promoted the use of all four macro skills, especially speaking and writing.

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Appendix

A Sample First Draft of a Question Pool Produced by the Group "Bulls"

- I ~~always~~ watch football match on TV or in Stadium.
  a) Always   b) often   c) sometimes → ...
- I draw a picture: always, sometimes, realy, never ✓
- I ~~always~~ write poem on / read a book on free times.
- I sometimes get up at ~~630~~ or ~~780~~
- I always go to the holiday in Antalya or in istanbul

-

Make two questions here!

I write a poem.
A) Always... B) Sometimes . . .

You have good questions! (Thanks!)

BULLS → Your name is frightening! I am afraid of bulls! ☺

Grup Üyeleri:
→ Group Members
- EMRE SELJİ (Başkan)
- M. BURAK DEMİRCİ
- BEKİR GÖĞÜŞ
- YAHYA YALÇIN
- TUĞBA ERDAL
- UĞUR YAK

Please, pay attention!
a) Don't test information
   (Do not ask questions which ask information.)

b) You can add some more question types. For example,

— I think that opera plays are perfect
   a) I agree
   b) I disagree
   c) I have no idea.