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The Past Tense In an Activity Based Syllabus
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Introduction

The aim of this particular lesson plan is to provide materials with elements that realize both form and function in communication. A second aim is to tailor the materials to a specific learning group: young learners in an EFL context. Yet another aim is to offer a variety of communicative operations in what are called contextualized or situational grammar activities. Some literature will be drawn upon to support these choices and will be included in the rationale below.

Teaching Context

Depending on learner aptitude, level and relative maturity, these materials are designed for young learners in an EFL context from approximately the 5th grade in elementary school up through high school. The instructional context is medium and large classrooms (perhaps 8 ~ 40 students) primarily studying as a whole group (though small group and pair work is not ruled out). This paradigm matches the preferred context in Korean private language schools at the present time.

The syllabus is quite another matter. First, there is a lexical element; for example, the 42 verbs used in tense lessons (e.g., present simple/progressive, past regular/irregular and future will/going to) were derived from collocated lists and much of the beginning level content consists of vocabulary and formulaic chunks. Second, as a whole, the curriculum is structural in format. It is pedagogic in nature as it includes forms that have been simplified from various reference grammars. Both a consideration for grammatical complexity (relative difficulty of teaching the forms) and learning difficulty (relative difficulty of acquiring the forms) inform this format. Having said that, mapping form and meaning together in communication is the ultimate goal in classroom interaction for this particular lesson and the curriculum as a whole.

Grammatical Structure

Past regular and irregular verbs were chosen because they exemplify markedness within the same tense. I consider irregular past verbs to be lexical in nature versus formulaic, which –ed/regular forms are known to be. Two points can be made in this regard. First, learners may be able to understand the nature of language as both predictable (as regular forms are) and unpredictable (as irregulars are). By understanding that "English is not math," learners may be more prepared for future, more difficult examples of markedness. Second, through exposure to many examples of irregular forms in a variety of contexts, these verbs may become more available for intake and possible acquisition.

Materials

The first activity was fashioned along the lines of an indirect consciousness raising task (Activity One only). The second activity, 'pictogloss' is a derivative of Wajnryb's (1990) classic dictogloss technique (Activity One only). The third activity makes use of a role play for meaning and creation (again, Activity One only). A rough estimate of time allocated for each activity is as follows:

- 1) Consciousness raising (Activity One): 20 minutes
- 2) Pictogloss (Activity One): 15 minutes
- 3) Role play (Activity One): 25 minutes

Materials and procedures can be seen in more detail on the web page:

http://eslenglishclassroom.com/index_files/Englishactivity.html (Ctrl + click to access).

Methodology

As mentioned above, the procedures can be found [on the web page](#). A second aspect of methodology is the use of corrective feedback, sometimes referred to as 'focus on form'. See the chart from Ellis (2007):

A taxonomy of CF strategies

	Implicit	Explicit
Input-providing	Recasts	Explicit correction
Output-prompting	Repetition Clarification requests	Metalinguistic explanation Elicitation Paralinguistic signals

In his presentation, Ellis points out the various approaches that researchers have taken in regards to implementing CF in classroom interaction. There are three points from this presentation that I would consider important for implementing CF in this teaching context:

- 1) Each strategy can be realized in a number of ways. This is especially the case with recasts (e.g., prosodic emphasis, rising or falling intonation, partial or complete reformulation or correcting just one or more than one feature). Recasts then may be implicit or much more explicit. Students having difficulty with forms or who are being exposed to new forms will require more explicit CF.
- 2) It is possible to employ CF in a subtle and non-invasive manner. We need to minimize impedance to the flow of communication.
- 3) From a sociocultural perspective: 'CF must be highly flexible, adapted to the individual learner and to the social/situational context'.

Rationale

A rationale for beginning the lesson with an indirect consciousness raising task can be seen in Fotos (2002). She explains the idea behind the Advance Organizer (Ausubel, D., Novak, J., & Hanesian, H. 1978) and its relation to new material for learners: 'Thus, new material should be connected to existing ideas in the learner's cognitive structure to facilitate the construction and organization of

form-meaning relationships. This is achieved through the use of the Advance Organizer, the presentation of introductory material ahead of the learning task and at a higher level of abstraction.... This consideration is support for explicit grammar instruction prior to performance of communicative activities containing the instructed point'. Another rationale comes from Ellis (2008) and can be summed up in three parts. CR as a means to acquire explicit knowledge allows learners to:

- 1) notice the structure in the input for future recognition.
- 2) notice the gap between the input and incorrect forms the learner is producing.
- 3) monitor production in order to improve output.

Ellis goes on to give four advantages to using indirect CR activities:

- 1) CR encourages learners to build their own reference grammar. In this way, they are more likely to remember the rules.
- 2) Research has shown that indirect CR can be just as effective as the direct kind; in fact, some learners actually prefer to discover the rules for themselves.
- 3) When students talk about grammar, there is a focus on form but also a focus on meaning as they try to work out the rule in collaboration.
- 4) CR encourages and even trains learners to search for and discover rules for themselves.

A focused task promotes the form-function mapping of a communicative activity. In order to rationalize the use of the activities in this lesson, I will compare the methodology/procedures in each activity to the focused task criteria taken from Ellis (2008wk-7):

Criteria for Focused Tasks	Pictogloss
1) A task must have a primary focus on meaning (students must be engaged in creating their own messages).	Yes, students must use there own words to describe a series of pictures.
2) There must be some kind of gap (information, opinion or reasoning).	Questionable: the gap here appears to be interpretive—students must infer facts from a set of pictures
3) The choice of language must rest with the students.	Partially: the students are given the cue 'yesterday' at the outset of the activity.

A task must be completed in terms of a specified outcome and not simply a display of language.	Yes, it is a verbal reproduction of a picture story.
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Table One: Focused task criteria relating to pictogloss.

For the most part, pictogloss meets the criteria of a focused task. At the very least, it meets the standards of a contextualized grammar activity. According to Ellis (2008-wk7) a contextualized grammar activity 'practices a grammatical structure in a specific context, in a situational-type way, but learners know what they are supposed to be practicing, and they still treat it as a grammar practice activity'. If we examine the research, there is no conclusive evidence whether focused tasks are more successful than contextualized grammar activities. Both possibilities meet the main aim of this lesson which is to build a form-function bridge in communication.

Criteria for Focused Tasks	Role Play Activity
1) A task must have a primary focus on meaning (students must be engaged in creating their own messages).	Partially: part one is a CR activity. Parts two and three may conform.
2) There must be some kind of gap (information, opinion or reasoning).	Questionable: the gap here appears to be interpretive—students must infer a story from a dialog
3) The choice of language must rest with the students.	Partially: 1) the students are cued with 'what happened', signaling past tense 2) the students are given the situation (past vacation) and must create a role play.
A task must be completed in terms of a specified outcome and not simply a display of language.	Yes, 1) the telling of a situation and 2) the creation of a role play.

Table Two: Focused task criteria relating to the role play activity.

We can reiterate from the above: this activity 'practices a grammatical structure in a specific context, in a situational-type way, but learners know what they are supposed to be practicing, and they still treat it as a grammar practice activity' and therefore claim some degree of communicativeness. Form-function mapping, once again, is the main aim of the lesson.

As a side note: It would be possible to place pictogloss first (as a candidate for a focused task) if students had had some exposure to past forms or if our aim was to assess our students' knowledge of such forms, but there would be no guarantee that they would use the past tense in the activity. They could, perhaps more easily, use the present progressive tense.

Conclusion

One may well ask: Where is the structured input? I've decided not to include an interpretation task because I feel that the juxtaposition of consciousness raising and text creation activities will allow students to bridge the form/meaning gap. Indeed, Erlam (2003) carried out a study involving structured input and a text creation type of production activity. She found that this communicative, meaning based production worked as well and perhaps better than the structured input activity.

In order to determine if the exercises and tasks (or task-like activities) in this lesson (as an exemplar of the curriculum as a whole) are successful as communicative activities, an analysis of classroom interaction will need to be carried out. This may be possible as a future research project.

A detailed procedure for carrying out this research is given in Ellis (1997):

Evaluating a task involves a series of steps:

Step 1: Choosing a task to evaluate

Step 2: Describing the task

Step 3: Planning the evaluation

Step 4: Collecting the information for the evaluation

Step 5: Analysing the information

Step 6: Reaching conclusions and making recommendations

Step 7: Writing the report

This, indeed, would be a follow-up activity.

Appendix

Materials and procedures can be seen in more detail on the web page:

http://eslenglishclassroom.com/index_files/Englishactivity.html (Ctrl + click to access).

References

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