

ALL TASKS ARE NOT CREATED EQUAL

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Tasks in language classes can be effective for fostering language acquisition and improving student engagement. For low-proficiency students, tasks can be especially effective as they encourage the student to use the language resources available to them to complete the task. In this study, six different types of task are investigated in terms of their effectiveness for lower-level students. Effectiveness is measured in terms of how well the task performed in regard to student enjoyment, student satisfaction with their performance, the English that was elicited through the task, the ability of the student to complete the task and the ability of the student to understand the task (what they were required to do). The six types of tasks being investigated are listing, ordering and sorting, comparing, problem solving, sharing personal experiences and creative tasks. The results indicate that the students enjoyed all six different types of tasks, but that problem solving tasks were the most effective.

INTRODUCTION

The motivation for this study stems from the difficulties faced by teachers of low-proficiency students who only take English classes to fulfil their foreign language requirements. These types of classes can be challenging for instructors as the students have very little motivation to learn English and have often had negative experiences in previous classes.

Task-based language teaching may be a useful approach for teachers as the tasks themselves can be enjoyable, and the students are likely to feel a sense of satisfaction at having completed the task using their English abilities. However, it is unclear which types of tasks are most effective for this group of language learners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teachers are always looking for better ways to encourage their students to participate actively in class. In language classes, this desire usually means approaches which have the students go beyond their comfort zone in using the L2. Tasks in language classes can be effective for fostering language acquisition and improving student engagement. While different researchers have mentioned essential characteristics of a task, such as having a pedagogical relationship to the real world (Long and Crookes, 1992), involving problem solving (Prabhu, 1987) or having goals (Skehan, 1998), in this paper, I will follow Ellis's (2003) definition that states a task should: (a) have a primary focus on meaning; (b) contain an information or opinion gap; (c) require learners to use their own linguistic resources to

complete the task; (d) have an outcome. I believe this definition illustrates why tasks are so practical when considering how the students will ultimately need to transfer their language knowledge from the classroom to the real world, while also serving as a useful guide for the teacher when designing tasks.

Communicative approaches to language acquisition have been favored for some time now. These approaches prepare learners to engage in meaningful interactions in the L2. TBLT, being a communicative approach, allows learners to focus on level-appropriate structures which will further their language acquisition (Harris, 2018; Harris & Leeming, 2022). Well-designed tasks for a particular group of students will challenge them linguistically but also be within their abilities. TBLT requires students to communicate meaning. Since the goal of the task is completion, learners will likely sacrifice accuracy for fluency (Cutrone & Beh, 2014). This sacrifice is desirable as it pushes students to test their abilities and not overly worry about making mistakes. Through these mistakes, the students can notice their weak areas and be motivated to improve. This aspect of communicative approaches to second language learning is beneficial for overall development. In a study comparing TBLT and PPP, Harris and Leeming found that both approaches were effective in developing speaking proficiency (2022). Furthermore, tasks can be especially effective with lower-level students (Willis, 1996) who struggle with expressing themselves through oral communication.

Willis (1996) listed six types of tasks: listing, ordering and sorting, comparing, problem solving, sharing personal experiences and creative tasks. She explains each of these types of tasks as follows:

- Listing - As students express their ideas, there will be a lot of communication. Brainstorming and fact-finding are two processes involved in this type of task. Learners draw upon their own knowledge and ask each other questions. Completed lists and/or mind maps are the outcome.
- Ordering and sorting - Four main processes are involved in these tasks: sequencing, ranking, categorising and classifying. These processes will require students to place items in a logical order, express personal values or criteria and create headings and group items accordingly.
- Comparing - Students use the processes of finding similarities and differences between information that is similar in nature.
- Problem solving - These tasks require students to use their intellectual and reasoning abilities. These tasks can be challenging, but they are often satisfying to solve. The type and complexity of the problem will determine the processes and time required to complete the task.
- Sharing personal experiences - Students talk more freely and share personal information. This interaction is similar to casual social conversation. The other types of tasks are more goal oriented, so these types of tasks are often more difficult to get going.
- Creative tasks - Pairs (or groups) of students engage in freer creative work that often has more stages than the other tasks. Creative tasks often combine the other five types of tasks in some way. In order to complete the task, the students must be organized and use team-work. The outcome is often of interest to people outside of the group who produced it.

During this study, for each of the six types of tasks, three tasks were utilized. These tasks will be described in the methodology section later in this paper.

TBLT is an approach to second language teaching which can be used regardless of the students' level. Tasks can help students of different levels become more proficient speakers. TBLT is also suitable for the classes which are often seen in Japanese junior and senior high schools which are grouped based upon school year as opposed to ability. In mixed-level classes, low-level students are exposed to the target language from more proficient learners, while more advanced students have the opportunity to learn how to explain ideas more simply to allow for communication (Willis, 1996). However, researchers have expressed concerns about using TBLT in Japanese EFL classrooms (Burrows, 2008). University entrance exams, which largely measure receptive ability, are one of the primary concerns. Researchers have expressed concern over how well TBLT can be utilized to prepare students for these entrance exams (Sato, 2009). Furthermore, time constraints and large class sizes which are common in Japan have also been mentioned as a reason against using TBLT (Butler, 2011). The situation may be changing though. In 2013, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Technology (MEXT) introduced a new course of study for language teaching. This new course of study has an increased focus on a more communicative approach to language teaching (Kotaka, 2013). This new focus is unlikely to change as MEXT recognizes the importance of training students to use English in real-world situations. English is seen as being the major communication tool in academia and global business, so there is a need for students to be exposed to authentic language before graduating university (Kotaka, 2013). Given that these changes have been gradually implemented over the past ten plus years, the situation may be improving.

To summarize, the qualities of a task within the TBLT framework offer language learners the opportunity to use the target language for meaningful communication. By having a clear outcome, students will be motivated to complete the task using whatever language resources that are available to them. The result may be ungrammatical utterances, but it is very likely that their fluency will be improved. This focus on communication has been shown to be effective. TBLT also allows for the use of many different task types and can be used for different levels of students. This flexibility is especially desirable in a Japanese context.

Research Questions

For this study, the following research questions will be investigated:

1. Which task type is most enjoyable for the students?
2. Which task type is easiest to understand?
3. When the students consider how well they did during the task, which task type leads to the highest level of satisfaction?
4. Which task type elicits the most spoken English?
5. Which task type leads to a sense of completion?

METHODS

The purpose of this study is to examine each of these task types for their relative effectiveness for lower-level university students. Effectiveness will be measured in terms of how well the task performed in regard to student enjoyment, student satisfaction with their performance, the English that was elicited through the task, the ability of the student to complete the task and the ability of the student to understand the task (what they were required to do).

The participants for this study were 50 first and second year (38 male and 12 female) economics majors at a private university in Tokyo, Japan. The students were spread across four communicative classes with two of the classes being for the first-year students and the other two classes being for the second-year students. Each of these classes met twice a week for a 90-minute lesson. The average TOEIC score for the students in the first-year classes was 275; however, it is likely this score underestimates the students' English ability as the students were required to take this test, but the score was not important for them. The scores for the second-year students were not available, but in general, the second-year students are at a slightly higher level. Overall, the students are friendly but not highly motivated; they are mostly interested in fulfilling their English requirement and do not have many goals to pursue English studies after meeting this requirement.

The tasks were always administered at the same time, approximately ten minutes into class and after a small talk activity which serves as a warm-up. The 18 tasks were done (one per class) from the third-class meeting through the twentieth. Table 1 shows the order that the different task types were administered. The different task types were spread out over the 18 classes as evenly as possible.

Table 1

Sequence of the Different Task Types

Task Type	Sequence
Listing	1, 10, 18
Ordering and sorting	5, 7, 16
Comparing	3, 9, 17
Problem solving	6, 8, 15
Sharing personal experiences	2, 12, 14
Creative	4, 11, 13

The actual tasks which were used are shown in Table 2. Every effort was made to follow a similar structure in which the students worked with a partner for the first part of the task and then changed partners to share or consolidate their answers. The tasks were chosen based upon the teacher researcher's belief in the ability of the students to understand and be able to complete the task. It generally took ten minutes to complete each task.

Table 2

Tasks Used during the Study

Task type	Task name	Brief description of the task
Listing	Sources of Spoken English	Ss make a multilevel mind map.
	Restaurant Words	Ss make a multilevel mind map.
	Shopping Lists	Students create a shopping list.
Ordering and sorting	Classifying Food	Ss make different categories for the food they eat every day.
	Agree, Disagree or Undecided	Ss sort statements into one of the three groups.
	Desert Island	Ss decide and rank the four most useful items to bring to a desert island.
Comparing	Japanese vs American Restaurants	Ss find three similarities and three differences between American and Japanese restaurants.
	Spot the differences	Ss find several differences between two similar pictures.
	Car Accident	Ss compare a written and video account of a car accident and find similarities and differences.
Problem solving	Dinner on a Budget	Ss plan a dinner for exchange students while staying under budget.
	Two Best Japanese Tourist Spots	Ss decide on the two best tourist spots for fun and culture while justifying their choices.
	Advice	Ss come up with three pieces of advice for a friend's problem.
Sharing personal experiences	Talk about your Preferences	Ss write sentences expressing their preferences and then find classmates who agree.
	What makes you ...?	Ss write sentences about their feelings and then find a classmate who is similar.
	What is the best ... you have ever ...?	Ss write sentences about their best experiences.
Creative	Make a Menu	Ss make a menu for a restaurant.
	Real-life Situations	Ss create a role-play for a likely travel situation.
	Which pen is better for students?	Ss create an experiment to determine the superior pen.

Note. Ss - students

Two data collection tools were used during this study. After each task, the students completed a short 5-item questionnaire. The items on the questionnaire mirror the research questions for this study. A semantic differential was used for each item in which the students

indicated their level of enjoyment etc. for each task. By assigning point values to each level, it will be possible to determine average scores for each question for each task. The second data collection tool was field notes. The teacher researcher took notes during each task recording any observations which seemed to be of interest.

RESULTS

The questionnaire results will be presented in the same order as the research questions. The students completed the short questionnaire immediately after each task. There were between 131 and 146 questionnaire responses for each task type. In the following paragraphs, the field notes' results will be shown according to the task type. Each of the research questions will be examined in the discussion section of this paper.

Figure 1 shows the results for the first questionnaire item which asked students how enjoyable the task was. A five-point semantic differential was used with a +2 score indicating enjoyable and a -2 indicating not enjoyable. Therefore, a score of 0 would be considered a neutral response, and the maximum positive score is 2.

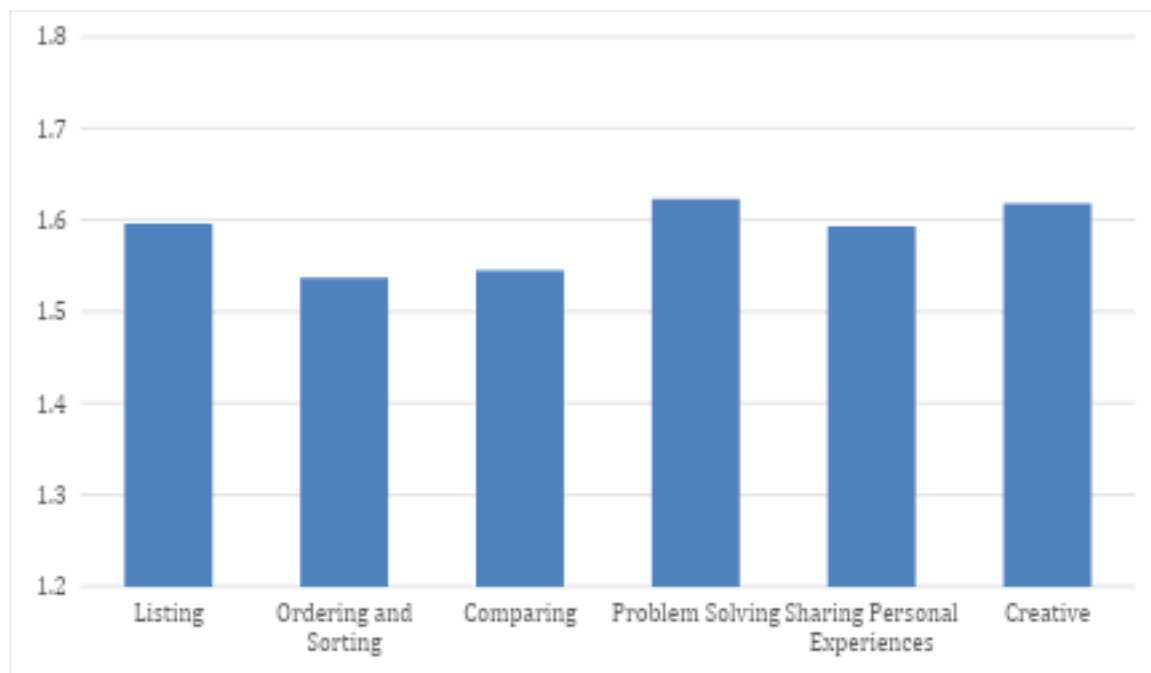


Figure 1. Questionnaire Results for Task Type and Enjoyability.

As can be seen in the figure above, all types of tasks were enjoyable for the students. Problem solving and creative tasks both elicited an average score above 1.6.

The results for the second questionnaire item about which tasks were easy to understand are seen in Figure 2. A similar five-point semantic differential was used with a +2 score indicating easy and a -2 indicating difficult.

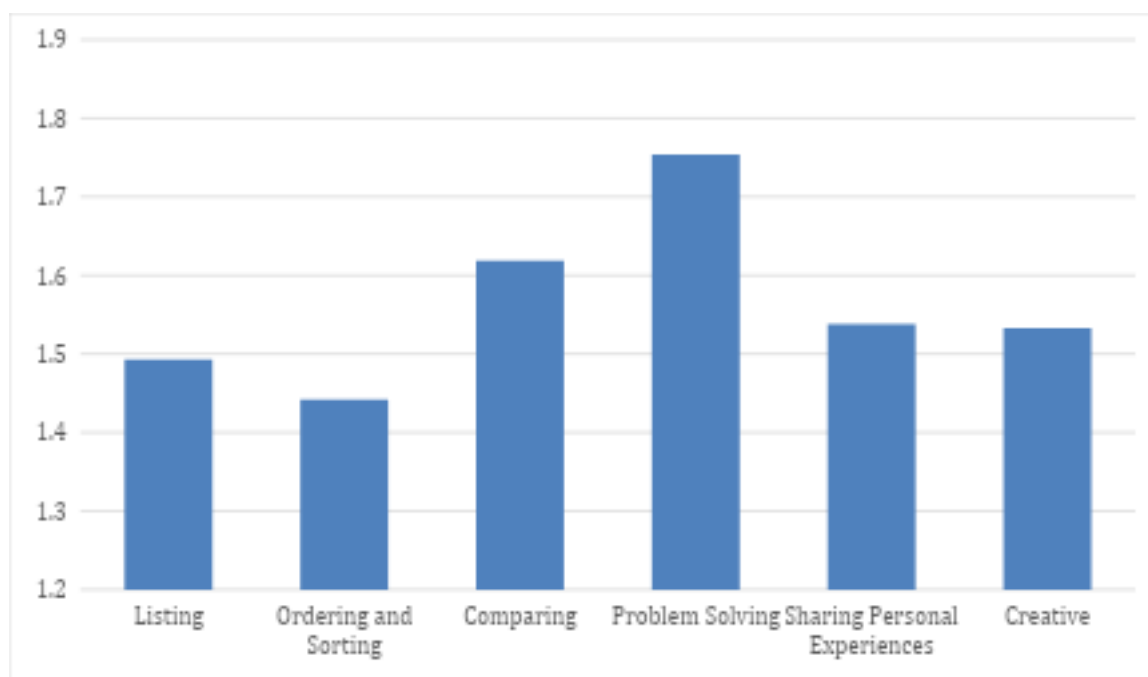


Figure 2. Questionnaire Results for Task Type and Understandability.

While each task type had a score above 1.4, problem solving tasks had the highest score.

Figure 3 shows the results for the questionnaire item which asked the students if they were satisfied with their performance during the task regarding using English. A score of +2 indicated satisfied while a score of -2 indicated not satisfied.

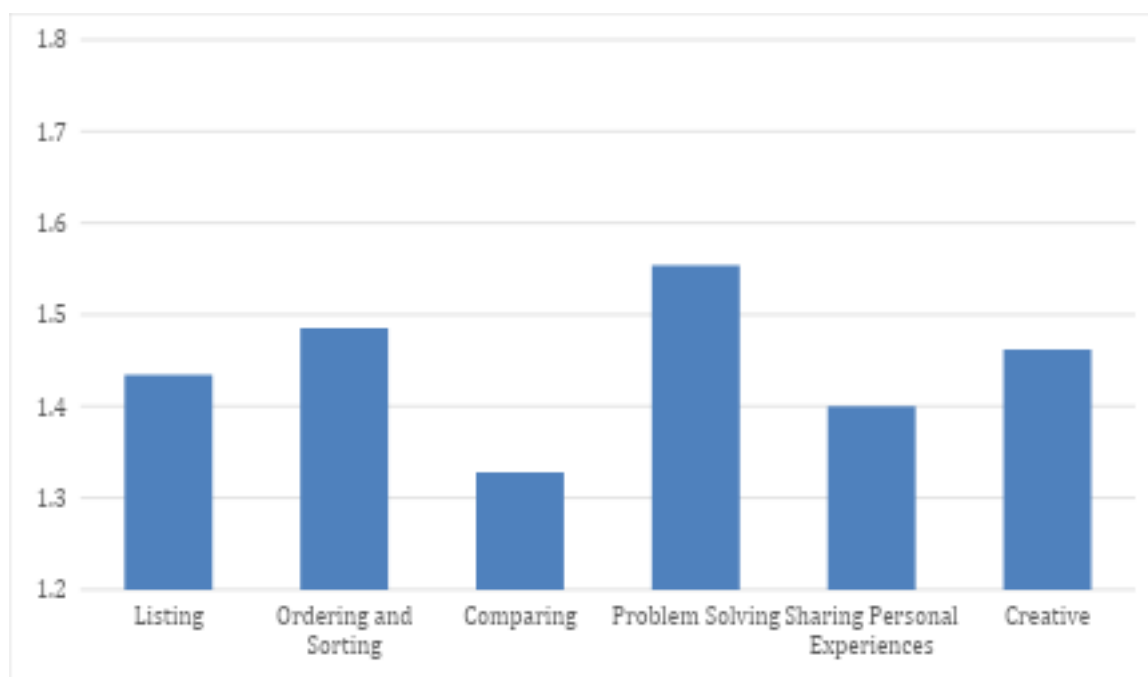


Figure 3. Questionnaire Results for Task Type and Student Satisfaction with their Performance.

Comparing tasks had the lowest score at approximately 1.33 while problem solving tasks had the highest score at approximately 1.55.

The fourth research question focused on the amount of English the students used during the tasks. The questionnaire results for this question are shown in Figure 4. A score of +2 indicates the students felt they used a lot of English while -2 indicates no English was used.

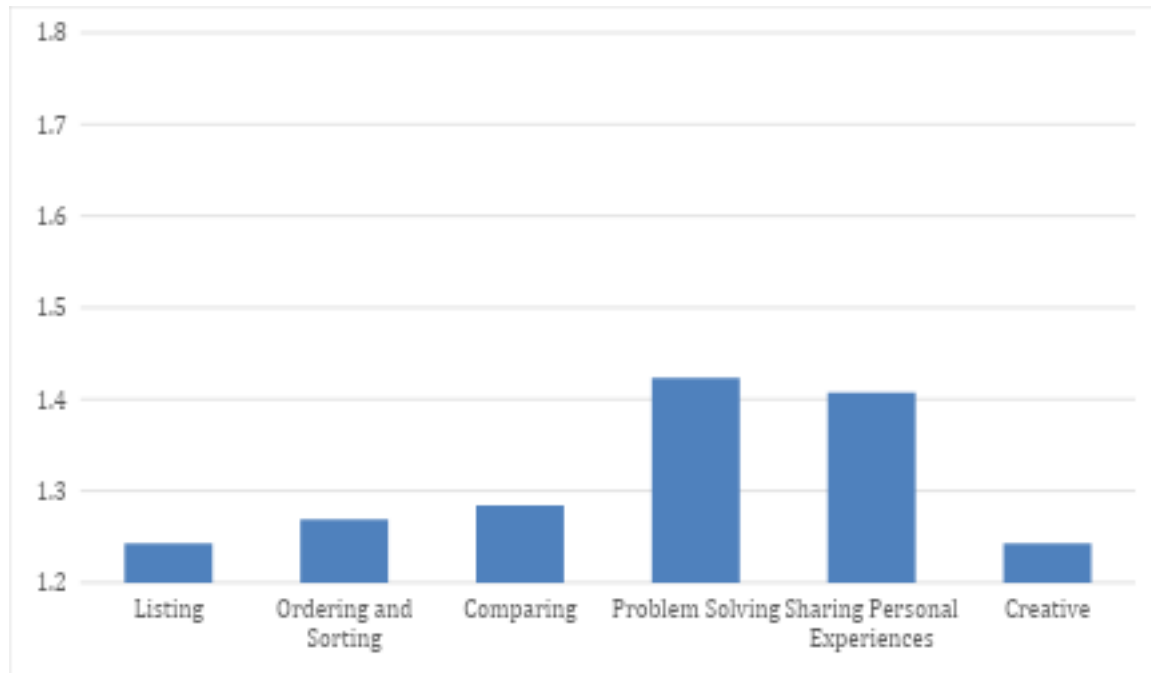


Figure 4. Questionnaire Results for Task Type and Amount of English Used during the Tasks.

Problem solving tasks and sharing personal experiences tasks had the highest scores with both task types being above 1.4 while the other four task types had scores below 1.3.

Figure 5 shows the results for the questionnaire item which asked the students if they were satisfied with their sense of completion for the task. A score of +2 indicated satisfied while a score of -2 indicated not satisfied.

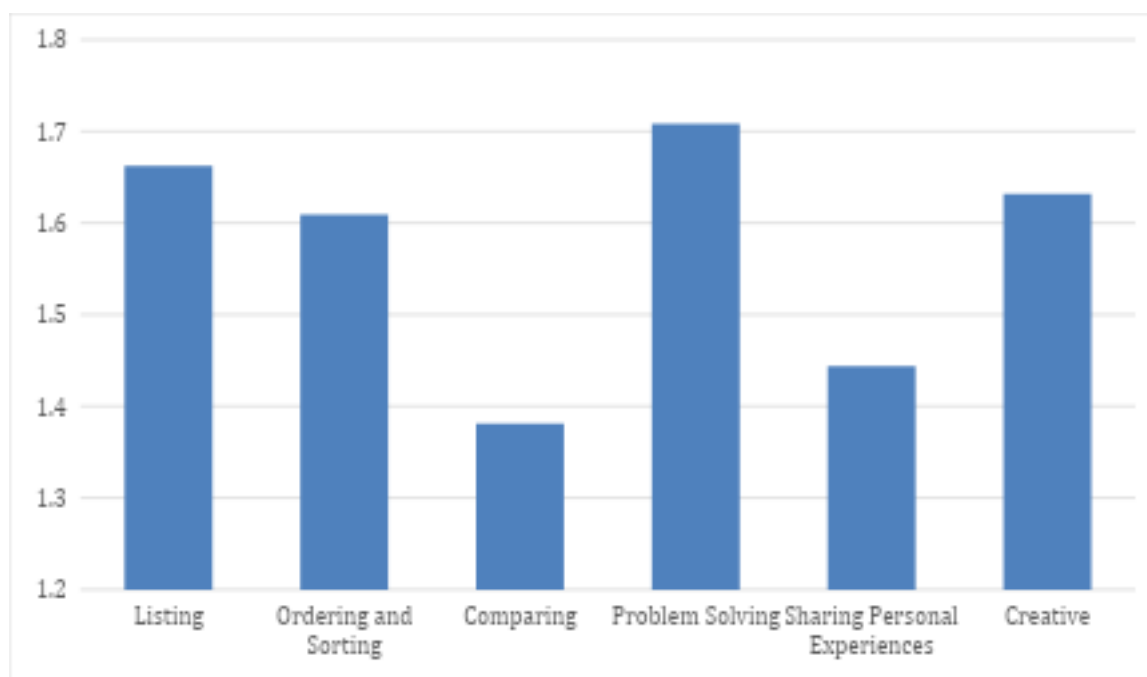


Figure 5. Questionnaire Results for Task Type and Student Satisfaction with their Sense of Completion.

Comparing tasks were the only task type that had a score below 1.4 while problem solving tasks had the highest score which was slightly above 1.7.

The qualitative data from the field notes will be arranged by task type. The number in parenthesis refers to the task order as seen in Table 1. The quotations represent themes that emerged while analyzing the data.

Listing

- Not much spoken English; they used the L1 more than expected. Spent a lot of time thinking about possible answers. (1)
- After changing partners, there was much more communication in the L2. (1)
- The students are using more English than usual but it is individual words. (10)
- Part 2 was much more communicative. (18)
- Because of the easy nature of this task, I think the students were more willing to use English to complete part 2. (18)

Ordering and sorting

- The Ss are having a hard time understanding the concept of making groups of words. (5)
- There was not as much communication as I expected. (7)
- The sharing part of the task elicited a lot of English, but the initial part was a bit quieter. (16)

Comparing

- Students had a hard time getting started. (3)

- They took their time to construct the sentences and questions. I think the example sentence patterns helped. (9)
- During the second part (changing partners and sharing answers) they mostly used English. (9)
- They are really trying! (9)
- They did not seem to prepare much during part 1, and their performance in part 2 was disappointing. (17)
- The difference in level between the two classes seemed to have had a significant effect. (17)

Problem solving

- Every group is on task. The class is much more lively than usual. (6)
- My last class did very well using English for their descriptions. (6)
- Still a lot of Japanese, but they are trying to justify their choices with proper English. (8)
- They are very engaged in the activity. (15)
- The second part of the activity was great; the students used a lot of English. (15)

Sharing personal experiences

- The students spoke more English after they understood what was expected of them. (2)
- The mingling aspect seems to encourage the students to use more English. They seem confident expressing themselves for 30 seconds or so but switched back to Japanese afterwards. The mingling lets them repeat that initial 30 seconds. (12)
- There was quite a bit of English spoken in part 2. (14)

Creative

- I had them change partners and describe their restaurant. This produced much more spoken English. (4)
- The end results were quite good; the conversations sounded natural, and the students could accomplish their goal. (11)
- I was worried that the lower-level class would have a tough time understanding the instructions, but they quickly figured out what to do. (13)
- They seem to be enjoying the activity and are definitely on task, but there is not too much spoken English happening. (13)
- Some pairs of students have just about finished while other pairs are just writing their first idea; it seems like there is a wide range of times required to finish the task. (13)

After analyzing the field notes, several themes emerged which will be discussed alongside the questionnaire data in the following section.

DISCUSSION

Each research question will be addressed by referring to the quantitative and qualitative data. Additional findings which do not directly relate to the research questions will then be presented.

The first research question was focused on which task would be most enjoyable for the students. The students seemed to enjoy each of the six task types. There was not a large difference in the average score from the semantic differential questionnaire item with all six tasks scoring between 1.54 and 1.62. However, the problem solving and creative tasks did receive the two highest scores, and the teacher research while discussing these types of tasks also mentioned in the field notes that the students were enjoying themselves and were on task.

The second research question asked 'which task type was easiest to understand?' The results indicated that there was not a task type which was particularly difficult to understand, but that problem solving tasks were quite easy to understand. Problem solving tasks received a score of 1.75 while listing (1.49) and ordering (1.44) were lower. In the field notes for an ordering task (5), I mentioned that the students were 'having a hard time understanding'. This task asked students to place different foods into different groups which they made themselves (eg. healthy/unhealthy). The goal was to create as many groups as possible. Many students mistook this activity for a listing type and created a long list of healthy and/or unhealthy foods.

Student satisfaction with their performance using English was investigated with the next research question. Problem solving tasks scored the highest with an average score of 1.55. Comparing tasks scored the lowest with a score of 1.33. Similar to the previous two research questions, the field notes mentioned that the students were using more English than usual during the problem solving tasks. It is likely that the students also noted this fact and scored these tasks higher for satisfaction.

The fourth research question focused on the amount of English the students spoke during these tasks. The two highest scores were for problem solving (1.42) and sharing personal experiences tasks (1.41). The other four task types scored below 1.3 with listing (1.24) and creative (1.24) being the lowest. For the sharing personal experiences tasks, the field notes mentioned that the mingling aspect of the task led to quite a bit of spoken English. All three tasks in this category had this mingling aspect as did one of the problem solving tasks. For lower-level students, mingling activities likely encourage the students to use a lot of the L2 as the students can repeat the same short conversation several times which would likely improve their confidence.

The final research question was focused on achieving a sense of completion. Problem solving tasks had the highest score of 1.71 while comparing and sharing personal experiences tasks were quite a bit lower at 1.38 and 1.44 respectively. Given the nature of these tasks, it seems logical that they would score lower than the other task types. For all three comparing tasks, there was a set number of similarities and/or differences which the students needed to find. If they did not find this number, they would likely have given a lower score on the questionnaire. For sharing personal experiences tasks, the students were mingling with each other, and the task did not finish until I asked everyone to sit down. Students might have not spoken to every classmate and felt that they did not fully complete the task.

While not a research question, the field notes indicated that the most communicative part of the tasks was the second part. For lower-level students, tasks which allow them to prepare

with a partner before requiring them to communicate in the L2 seem to be more effective. While the initial part of these tasks does not elicit as much English as I would like, the second part makes up for this shortcoming with the students speaking at a slightly higher level than they would be able to achieve without preparation. Another finding that has some pedagogical value is that creative tasks often lead to situations in which some pairs of students have completed the task, or part of the task, while other groups have barely started. This disparity created an awkward situation of having to choose between having students sitting for several minutes with nothing to do or starting the second part even though several students are not prepared.

Overall, all task types were well received by the students. Problem solving tasks received the highest scores overall and had the most positive comments in the field notes. Teachers may believe that listing or comparing tasks are most suitable for lower-level students, but it seems that more interesting task types like problem solving may be more effective.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joshua Antle is an Associate Professor at Tsuda University in Tokyo, Japan. His research interests are collocations, task-based language teaching and spoken fluency.

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