

Task-Based Reading Activities Using Authentic Materials and Skills

One of the biggest challenges that I, a seasoned English language teacher, have faced in the classroom is how to liven up reading classes. Of course, there are pre-discussions and post-discussions, as well as multiple ways to make accompanying tasks related to comprehension and vocabulary more fun, but reading itself is inherently a quiet and solo task. Furthermore, the standard skills we are trying to build in our students—skimming, scanning, making predictions and inferences, guessing vocabulary meaning from context—require practice, practice, practice. While useful and necessary, such practice can easily come to feel repetitive, redundant, and downright boring.

One solution I came up with while teaching university students in Uzbekistan combines the use of authentic materials, task-based learning, and stations. This article discusses this activity and how it evolved into two separate stages, both of which can easily be adapted for a variety of needs, levels, and age groups.

RATIONALE FOR A TASK-BASED READING ACTIVITY

Importantly, this activity makes use of authentic materials. While there is a plethora of quality teaching texts that focus on reading skills, these materials were created for the purpose of being accessible to learners and are consequently not authentic. This is not to say that such texts are not useful. They serve an important purpose in terms of providing accessible reading material and explicitly teaching reading

skills. However, they have their limitations. Introducing authentic materials into the classroom can serve as an extension of or supplement to educational texts. Using materials not specifically designed for learners has numerous benefits, including greater interest (Martinez 2002) and motivation (Buzarna-Tihenea and Nadrag 2018; Guariento and Morley 2001). Moreover, authentic texts provide a necessary challenge, as a “main reason for using authentic materials in the classroom is once outside the ‘safe’, controlled language learning environment, the learner will not encounter the artificial language of the classroom but the real world and language how it is really used” (Berardo 2006, 67).

Authentic materials offer a way to scaffold students from classroom reading and related tasks to texts they will encounter and skills they will need to use once they are out of the

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classroom. Authentic materials—including old receipts, tickets, brochures, and notes that are lying around most people’s homes or classrooms—are also handy for teaching contexts that may not be well-supplied with teaching materials.

This task-based reading activity also allows students to negotiate on their own terms rather than with a teacher navigating them through each step. This lends itself to a student-centered class with many opportunities for communication. Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011, 193) consider task-based teaching to be an “example of the ‘strong version’ of the communicative approach, where language is acquired through use. In other words, students acquire the language they need when they need it in order to accomplish the task that has been set before them.” Such tasks not only promote authentic communication, but also lead to consciousness raising (Ellis 2009). As will be seen below, both stages of this activity support these goals. The first stage involves the more traditional completion of a worksheet, as students search for and discuss answers to the questions, while the second part involves more of a problem-solving strategy. As students are working in pairs, they offer support to one another and negotiate answers. Simultaneously, they are incidentally learning and noticing the features of different types of texts.

As this is a task-based activity, students are encouraged to focus on the meaning and function of language rather than specific forms. This is important because when learners are reading in a non-native language, the skills applied in first-language (L1) reading are often abandoned in second-language (L2)

reading. Even proficient readers tend to approach the task in a bottom-up approach as they try to construct meaning in a language other than their own (Koda 1990; Prichard and Atkins 2018). The questions that accompany my reading activity are intended to promote top-down processing both by way of the types of questions asked and particularly in the second stage of the activity, by replicating a real-life scenario. The task of problem solving is intended to encourage students to engage their L1 reading strategies rather than dissecting the text word by word.

This activity is also motivating. Reading, like many skills, is best improved through frequent application of the skill. And as with many other things in life, motivation is a key factor in how often one practices a particular skill. This is also the case with reading, whether in one’s first language or a new language (Grabe 1991; Wang and Guthrie 2004). Motivation can be of an extrinsic nature (grades, fear of punishment) or an intrinsic nature (interest, satisfaction, joy) (Brown 1994; Ng and Ng 2015). This activity provides the extrinsic push—after all, it is a class assignment—but also sets up an environment for intrinsic motivation in the form of a fun and interactive activity. Moreover, motivation is fed by success and a sense of capability. Through the use of stations, learners have freedom to make choices, thereby setting themselves up for greater success and a sense of accomplishment. The variety of questions in both activities also allows students at a range of levels to complete all or most of the tasks.

Finally, this activity is based on the use of stations. For my purposes, I am defining a

station as a distinct physical work area within a classroom. The distinction of the work area could be made through physical separation like using individual desks or tables—each being a separate station. Or, if this is not possible, all the stations could be set up on one or two tables, with each station having enough physical space from the next to make it recognizable as separate. Working in stations is somewhat common for students in the West, especially in elementary school. For example, if the students are learning about animals, the teacher might set up stations that each feature one type of animal with an image, some sort of text, and possibly a task. The students move from station to station, learning about the different animals. Think of a museum. The exhibits are set up in distinct areas, and people move around the space to view the exhibits, spending a short time on some and a longer time on others.

The purpose of using stations is that the materials don't move, the students do. This keeps the materials organized, forces the students to move around, and allows them to choose what order to do things in. According to Diller (2003, 2), such stations provide “hands-on learning that engages students,” while also promoting autonomy as learners are required to make their own choices. The freedom to make choices increases engagement and motivation; in addition, physically changing locations is a sure way to activate the brain (Jensen 2005; Kuczala 2019). And at a more basic level, workstations offer students a break from the usual routine of sitting at desks, eyes and ears focused on the teacher or the text. Furthermore, as the work is done in teams, there is more opportunity for cooperation and authentic communication as the learners negotiate the task and how best to achieve it.

TASK-BASED READING ACTIVITY

This activity takes place in two separate stages. The first stage entails completing a worksheet and discussing answers to questions, while the second stage engages students in problem-solving tasks.

Stage 1

Procedure

In the class I originally designed this activity for, I had 16 students, so I created nine stations and paired students into eight groups; I had one extra station for purposes of flexibility and timing. I later made an easy adaptation to accommodate larger groups. When demonstrating this activity for a group of 60 teachers, I divided them into large groups and set up 12 stations; the group members took turns going to the stations and reporting back to their larger groups.

For my nine stations, I collected nine varied texts: a travel guide, a novel, a menu, a museum brochure, a map, a newspaper, a grammar book, the instructions from a card game, and an issue of *English Teaching Forum*. I set these out on desks around the classroom and labeled the desks 1 through 9.

I then created a worksheet with eight questions and made a copy for each station (see Table 1 for three examples). (An alternative would be to post a set of questions at each station and have students write down answers in their notebooks, thereby avoiding the need for so many photocopies.) Questions 1 to 6 were the same for all the stations and included general questions regarding the type of text, its purpose, the intended audience, and whether the student would want to read the text. Questions 7 and 8 were detail or inference questions specific to the material.

At the start of class, I paired up students, distributed the worksheets, and gave instructions about the task. Students began at whichever station they wanted to and filled out the corresponding questions about the corresponding text. I set no time limit, and students could visit each station in whatever order they chose. They were encouraged to try to answer all the questions but also given permission to move on or ask for help if they got stuck.

Near the conclusion of class, I asked the students to answer two final questions, identifying the skills used during the task and

Station #1	1. Title:	
2. What is it?		3. Is it fiction or nonfiction?
4. Who is the intended audience?		5. Why would someone read this?
6. Would you read this? Why or why not?		
7. On what page can we read about the Aral Sea?		8. The author, Alex Ulko, was the first person to do something. What was it?

Station #2	1. Title:	
2. What is it?		3. Is it fiction or nonfiction?
4. Who is the intended audience?		5. Why would someone read this?
6. Would you read this? Why or why not?		
7. On what pages can we read about sports?		8. Fourteen were hurt in an accident on Saturday (pg. 5). What was the cause of the accident?

Station #3	1. Title:	
2. What is it?		3. Is it fiction or nonfiction?
4. Who is the intended audience?		5. Why would someone read this?
6. Would you read this? Why or why not?		
7. Who drew the pictures?		8. Who or what is Charlotte?

Table 1. Three worksheet examples for Stage 1

saying whether they enjoyed it. We then had a short class discussion about which materials were most interesting or confusing. I then collected the worksheets to identify common strengths and weaknesses in the class. While those particular students were all pre-service teachers, this task and its accompanying skills are relevant to all general-reading classes.

Stage 2

Procedure

For Stage 2 of the activity, I used the materials from the first stage and supplemented them with similar types of texts (more novels, grammar books, maps, brochures, game rules from websites). I created two substations on opposite sides of the room and filled them with texts loosely grouped together. Each substation had a specific scenario. Scenario #1 involved an English teacher looking to do professional development and self-improvement (as most of my students were future English teachers) and corresponded to a substation stocked with teaching materials and related information. Scenario #2 referred to a woman preparing to travel abroad, so this substation included travel guides, maps, brochures, and the like. I created this scenario based on my students' interest in travel. For both scenarios, irrelevant texts were mixed in with the relevant ones.

For each scenario, I created realistic questions a person in that situation might have. For example, a question for Scenario #1 would be, "Tim wants to become a better grammar teacher. Please suggest a book that

will help him to do this. Explain why you suggested this book." Or, "Tim is looking for a fun game to play in class to encourage his students to speak. Suggest a game that will be good for this. Why are you recommending this game?" (See Table 2 for example questions for Scenario #2.) I then cut up the questions and placed them into two envelopes corresponding to the scenario and substation set up with relevant (and irrelevant) materials.

Again, students partnered up and then decided which scenario was more appealing to them (luckily, I got a fairly even split). Those who chose Scenario #1 were asked to take a question from an envelope taped to the wall, go to Substation #1 and find the best materials to answer the question, and write their answers down. Once they were finished, they returned the question to the envelope and took a new question. Those who chose Scenario #2 did the same with the different set of questions in the second envelope, using the materials from Substation #2. This part of the activity served as a relay to keep the students moving and focused only on the task at hand.

The challenge for the students was to first identify the most useful texts to answer the question. For some questions, there were multiple texts with appropriate answers; for others, I had purposely set out unrelated materials intended to act as distractors. Once the most suitable texts had been identified, students had to narrow them down to the best one (as at least two of

<p style="text-align: center;">Maria</p> <p>Maria is getting ready to begin a one-month trip. She will travel to Portland (Oregon), Turkey, Uzbekistan, and Kathmandu. She is doing some research to prepare for her trip.</p>	<p>1. In Portland, Maria wants to stay in a neighborhood with good food, bookstores, and convenient public transportation. She also prefers to stay in a hostel. What neighborhood do you recommend, and why?</p>	<p>2. Maria has only two days to spend in Istanbul, Turkey. She is most interested in seeing mosques, palaces, and bazaars. Should she stay on the European or Asian side of Istanbul? Why? What will she be able to see?</p>	<p>3. While in Antalya, Turkey, Maria has one day for an excursion. She is interested in history and nature. Suggest a trip for her. What will she see?</p>
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Table 2. Example questions for Scenario #2

each type of text had been set out). For the example question above regarding Tim and his desire to be a better grammar teacher, there were two grammar books on the table: Betty Azar's *Fundamentals of English Grammar* and Penny Ur's *Grammar Practice Activities*. Either choice was appropriate, as long as the students explained their choice rationally. To wrap up the lesson, students combined into two larger groups corresponding to the two substations and discussed their answers. Then, as a whole class, we discussed questions that had resulted in varied answers, and students justified their choices.

I was fortunate that my students were mostly pre-service English teachers and as an English teacher I had plenty of materials relevant to their interests. For those who do not have such access to authentic materials, printed pages from online resources, photocopies of handouts or quizzes, and even student-generated work could be used. For example, the teacher could set out some paragraphs written by students (with the names removed) for the following question: "Tim wants to use one of his students' paragraphs as a model for a descriptive paragraph. Which one should he use, and why?" A single computer in the classroom or even students' own cell phones can also be used to search or survey specific online sources. One such example could be as follows:

"Tim needs a discussion activity for his intermediate students. Go to <https://americanenglish.state.gov/resources/activate-board-games> and find an activity for Tim's class. Why do you think this is a good choice for his class?"

This stage is adaptable to the context of more-general, lower-level, or younger learners. A general task would be to create stations using relevant authentic materials and have students look through them and make recommendations for various people. It might look something like this:

1. You have a friend who likes stories about animals. Which book will you recommend to her/him? Why?
2. Your younger brother wants to learn more about astronomy. Find an article that might be interesting to him. Why did you choose it?
3. Your teacher asked you to choose a news story to share with the class. Go to <https://www.voanews.com/> and skim the headlines. Which story will you choose? Why?

The questions can be adapted to suit the materials on hand as well as the level and interest of the learners. If you are using texts printed off the Internet, in most cases it is feasible to use a sample text (the cover page, the table of contents, or a paragraph or two) rather than printing out an entire work.

When I tried my original version, both stages of the activity went over well. When my students walked in the room, they immediately headed to the stations, drawn by the materials on display. In my teaching context, original English materials were rare and often kept in locked cases. My biggest challenge was getting the students to sit down so I could explain the task, and then later getting them to finish up and leave. They wanted more time to look over all the materials, and many asked to borrow items. From their discussion and written comments, I found that they were excited to practice their usual skills on authentic materials and in an authentic way. They were also excited about their ability to successfully interact with real-life texts. I was pleased that they were able to identify the necessary skills and were hungry to apply them.

Interestingly, I also found an even split in terms of which stage of the activity—1 or 2—was preferred. Some liked the survey nature of the first stage because they were able to explore multiple types of texts.

Others preferred the simulation of a real-life problem-solving experience.

FURTHER APPLICATIONS

I used this two-stage activity to introduce the reading segment of our syllabus to the class, allowing them to practice a multitude of skills on various types of texts and genres. The activity also allowed me to do a needs-based analysis of their skills as well as their interests. I used the activity as a guide to determine the course for subsequent classes; however, there are additional teaching applications, including the following:

Beginner Reading Class

Being able to identify the type of text (book, newspaper, magazine, etc.), genre, title, and author are key skills we can begin teaching even before our learners become adept readers. A simplified version of Stage 1 asks students to identify the most basic components of a text.

1. What is it? (It might be a book, newspaper, email, etc.)
2. What is the title?
3. Who wrote it?
4. When was it written?
5. Do you want to read this? Why or why not?

If the stations are all composed of books, students could also be asked to identify the number of pages or chapters, whether the text is fiction or nonfiction, and the genre.

Extensive Reading

Another use for this activity is to expose a class to options for extensive reading. Rather than just looking at book covers and half-heartedly skimming the summary, readers would have to take a closer look at their options and make choices about their reading, leading to a greater chance that they will actually read and finish the books they choose.

Introduction to Research Writing

Originally, I got the idea for the reading stations from a workshop I attended about academic writing (Mulder, Spitzer, and Beck 2012). The presenters set out stations of different types of academic texts—journals, books, magazines—and had the participants identify information relevant to a reference page such as author, publishing date, and publisher. It is a great way for students to survey the variety of secondary sources available for research writing and practice locating key information. Additionally, the teacher could make stations using different articles or even sections from articles and ask students to find and cite evidence that supports or contradicts various statements.

Media Literacy

A variation of this activity is useful to employ strategies used in media literacy. This could be done with stations where each device (computer, tablet, mobile phone) is open to a different website, video, or other digital text or—if multiple devices are not available—with paper printouts of articles, advertisements, or images of websites. The tasks could involve identifying sources, perspective, and bias as well as evaluating the trustworthiness of various sources.

Resource Exploration

When the English Department in my university received a donation of a large number of resource books, I conducted a similar activity with the staff. I set up stations of books grouped by topic and created imaginary classes and syllabi situations. The teachers then sorted through the materials to find those most suitable to each situation. As a result, an overwhelming number of resources became familiar and accessible. And of course, during this activity, the teachers identified books that were useful to the actual classes and teaching contexts they were engaged in. Rather than remaining on the shelf or being hoarded by a few, almost all of the books were checked out and used in appropriate classes. This activity could be adapted for any situation where the goal is to make a large cache of resources available for use.

What remains constant is that the strategy encourages learners to explore, make their own choices, and apply critical thinking, all while changing their physical space.

CONCLUSION

This activity illustrates just some of the possibilities for using stations with authentic materials in a task-based lesson. The types of stations, materials, and tasks can be manipulated in a myriad of ways for numerous purposes and skill levels. What remains constant is that the strategy encourages learners to explore, make their own choices, and apply critical thinking, all while changing their physical space. It is a strategy that can be used once in a semester or on a more regular basis. The result will be a reading class that is active, engaging, and effective.

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