

Mind Maps and Task-Based Language Learning: A Synergistic Approach

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Abstract: *This paper is an attempt to explain two techniques which the author feels should be integrated into the university classroom when teaching the English language. The two techniques are Mind – Mapping and Task-Based Learning (TBL). The idea is to use these techniques in tandem and show how they form a synergistic relationship. One, if not the most important objective, is to show why the utilization of these two techniques can forge a motivational attitude towards language learning by having a more student-centered classroom environment as opposed to a teacher-centered pedagogical approach. By empowering the students with an increased decision-making role in the classroom, should, in theory, make the classroom more participatory and more focused on the tasks at hand. During the author's brief time as an English language lecturer in the Faculty of Education, the syllabus mandated that the students give a presentation as part of the evaluation criteria. This involved performing some individual internet research and then presenting, as a group, the results of this research orally to their fellow classmates. After having introduced all three classes to the concept of mind-mapping, (which I emphasized at the time was not a requirement to turn in as a paper). I was pleased to see that many of the student groups did use the mind-mapping technique to organize their presentations. They seemed to understand that the sharing of ideas in their brainstorming sessions can be a productive experience. As a result, I believe that the oral presentation representing the TBL portion of the project, was more organized and coherent than it might have been had the mind-mapping not be used.*

To me, this demonstrated a clear manifestation of how the utilization of this concept which could be used to motivate students and encourage them to share in the enjoyment of language learning.

Introduction

What are mind maps and what is task-based learning? This article describes each of these language learning techniques and then demonstrates how each can support the other in providing a student with a language motivating approach and achieving significant progress in attaining noticeable fluency in a foreign language. In this article, I propose how these techniques can be implemented with a focus on the study of the English language.

By illustrating the design of mind maps, a student can visually get a more solid grasp of the important points to discuss when finally delivering a presentation to the class. The presentation is part of a task-based project in which the students are challenged to research and then discuss a real-life situation that they can readily identify. This, in turn, can generate more intense interest in the project and the students can then be motivated to successfully complete the task to their and their teacher's satisfaction.

Lastly, this article explains how my Burapha English classes utilized mind- mapping and TBL in making presentations based on the various topics as covered in the English reader. I then come to some conclusions about the approach using these techniques and how they might be used in future elementary, intermediate, and advanced English classes.

Definition of the Two Techniques.

Mind- Mapping, Mind- Mapping is a means of visually designing a particular topic with the idea of breaking down the various points one wants to discuss in a report. A mind map can be defined

as a “visual representation of hierarchal that includes a central idea or theme that is surrounded by connecting branches of associated topics (Inspiration.com., 2013). It is formed by drawing a large circle which holds the main topic and then drawing connecting lines with smaller circles that contain some of the aspects of the main topic that the student/writer wants to include in a written and/or oral report (see Appendix A). A more detailed discussion of this technique will be forthcoming.

Tasked-Based Learning. Task-Based Learning or TBL is a student-centered learning technique in which the topic, selected by the teacher, is one which students can easily relate (Teal Center, 2012), for example, the pros and cons of daylight savings time in the USA, the topic of what constitutes healthy food, vacation time as a policy of different kinds of businesses. By selecting a task with a topic that is readily identifiable to most students, provides the students with some known vocabulary and can act as a motivating factor in having them work on a project with some enthusiasm. This usually starts with a brainstorming session among members of a group which can involve the use of mind maps and then proceeds to performing some internet research in order to increase the amount of information on the topic. Once this is accomplished, the group can allocate which members take on certain aspects of the topic with the idea of ultimately writing and/or delivering a written or oral report or even having a debate (Appendix B). Once the written portion of the task has been completed, the group members can review the language they have used and make corrections to grammatical errors, or make stylistic changes. This kind of communicative activity is at the heart of the TBL technique.

Task-Based Learning (TBL) is also known as task-based language teaching or task-based instruction and focuses on the use of authentic language and on asking students to perform meaningful tasks using the target language (Larrson 2001). These tasks can be described as real-world tasks; for example, deciding which university to attend, what they buy at the grocery store, analyzing the advantages and disadvantages of working the day shift versus the night shift when deciding on a job, and so forth. Utilizing the target language in conjunction with working on real-world tasks, tends to enhance language fluency and instill student confidence in using the foreign language. The environment of the classroom supports positive interactions among the learners (Teal Center, 2012).

The teacher is initially involved in assisting the students with the choice of topic, and even supplies, to a certain extent, some key vocabulary and keywords, although this is not always necessary depending on the skill level of the students. For the most part, the student learners are responsible for selecting the appropriate language. The teacher, in the TBL exercise, is relegated to that of observer and counselor; later, he critiques each group’s presentation. Thus, we can say in effect, that TBL is a student-centered methodology. The paradigm shift from a traditional, teacher-centered to a student-centered environment is one that should be considered in more universities as a viable, alternative approach to language learning.

The Synergy in Practice.

There are points to be made that support the notion that mind-mapping and task-based learning have a synergistic relationship. Mind-mapping involves group brainstorming and implementing visual designs related to the topic at hand. Input from each of the student participants adds content and meaning to the visual design with the ultimate goal of language acquisition through the process of communication. The visual expression of mind-mapping tends to complement the TBL activity by focusing and concentrating on particular aspects of a topic which can subsequently be rendered through the group making an oral presentation. It cannot be overemphasized that the topics selected should depict real-life situations that the students can relate.

Creating a visual representation of marketing goals can be done through mind-mapping. This provides a medium for effectively brainstorming ideas which tends to enhance the clarification of goals. Another benefit of mind-mapping is the making the ability to recall information easier, it helps students to plan tasks, and facilitates the organization of ideas and concepts. This technique also helps the student to perform research and build on the writing process.

Through the visual design of the mind map, one can more clearly observe patterns and opportunities that may not be noticed when utilizing a linear marketing outline (Appendix C). Mind-

mapping, in this case, identifies the relationship between marketing tactics which provides the genesis of producing a successful marketing plan. Thus, mind-mapping helps to see the bigger picture, to better view complex information, and enhance imagination and concentration which can enable one to create a detailed marketing plan significantly easier.

Thus, a student majoring in business can utilize this technique and discuss with his business major colleagues how they might prepare a marketing plan either for a service or for a manufactured product. It can be used for a service or product to be offered domestically or one that shows potential for export.

Group Dynamics.

When it comes to language learning, mind-mapping and task-based learning (TBL) these techniques are best done in groups. The members tend to brainstorm better and ideally lend support to each member. In the process of Mind Mapping, the group dynamics act as an incentive for the group to provide information on a topic that will give new insight to those student colleagues who will be in the audience.

As an example of a topic, let's use "Planning a Holiday" and construct a mind-map to include some aspects of planning a trip which might involve researching what destination possibilities might exist, the expenses which might be incurred to include transportation, accommodation and food, what recreational amenities a particular hotel/resort property might offer, and so forth. Appendix A shows how such a mind map might be structured. All these details should be included when constructing a mind map. This can then become the genesis of a TBL exercise which will provide practice in listening to the opinions of others and coming to some kind of consensus concerning what aspects should be included in the final report. Constructing the mind map forces the students to write clear, coherent English; consequently, the resulting group dynamics can be defined as synergistic as one technique feeds off the other.

Both mind mapping and TBL are helpful to students in the report-writing process and provide a natural way of thinking and building the thoughts focused on a particular theme. For the teacher, mind mapping provides a medium which can demonstrate if the students are comprehending the concept and additionally allows the teacher to evaluate the topic the students have selected. TBL tends to spur student motivation for language learning which, it can be argued, is its chief objective. Subsequently, this motivation then translates to better, overall performance.

The teacher, in this use of mind-mapping and TBL, in essence, acts more like an advisor to the students and TTT (teacher talk time) is substantially curtailed. The teacher is most involved in the initial pre-task part of the cycle and then much less so in the task cycle which includes choosing the theme through brainstorming, planning to include research, and finally delivering the actual report (Willis, 1996). So, a pre-task activity might involve, for example, watching a film on DVD and assisting the students in preparing a list of key vocabulary. Still other examples might include reading a passage and attempting to select the main characters or completing a "fill-in-the-gap exercise" (a cloze text) while listening to a song. Next is the Task-Based Cycle in which the task is delineated, the research is performed, and the report is generated both in oral and narrative form. Lastly, there is the Language Focus portion of the task cycle in which the teacher analyzes the presentation and recommends what the students need to improve upon. The students then follow-up this critique by examining, in some detail the structure of the narrative, the usage of new vocabulary, and any stylistic improvements that need to be studied and changed for the better.

Mind Mapping and TBL as a Classroom Trial.

During this semester I have encouraged the second-year Burapha University students in my three English language classes to utilize the mind mapping technique when preparing their group presentations. As an organizational vehicle, I believe that most, of the presentations were quite well-organized with each student group member having been appointed a particular subtopic which they presented orally. Assembling a group presentation can be a rather formidable undertaking for

Thai second year English language students; I am firmly convinced that with the brainstorming and subsequent mind map production, the organization of the presentations was greatly facilitated and gave that confidence that comes with knowing exactly what research a student is responsible for in allowing him/her to focus on the subtopic at hand. Please refer to appendices D and E which shows the reader how the organization of a presentation can be visually and design- oriented and can contribute mightily towards making the study of English (or other languages) more in tune with everyday reality.

Summary and Recommendations.

I believe that the combined use of mind-mapping and TBL can achieve significant progress in accelerating a student's English fluency and would recommend that these techniques be implemented on a trial basis beginning with those students at the pre-intermediate level and higher. These are definitely two techniques that lend themselves to students working in groups and thus can be used in large classes.

As previously mentioned, the mind-mapping exercise forces the group to go through the brainstorming process which ideally tends to engage each group member to use his/her imagination and focus on the topic at hand. Once the assignment has been made as to what member will research a particular aspect of the topic, that student then has the responsibility to perform the necessary research and obtain details on that subtopic, and in so doing, is exposed to new vocabulary and ideas that will tend to improve overall reading and reading comprehension.

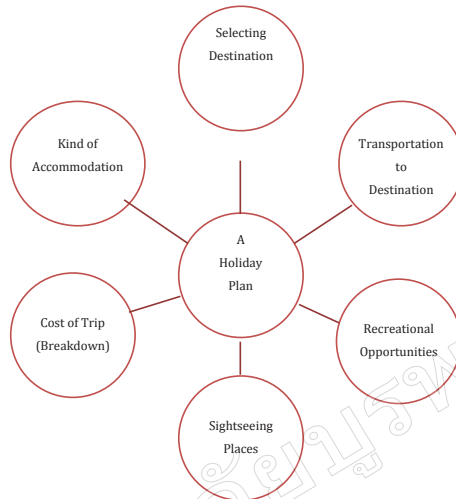
Once the research has been completed, the group member needs to write up his aspect of the topic; this provides the student with much-needed practice in English composition, arguably the most difficult component of the assignment. Then, the group needs to decide on the presentation sequence with the goal of enlightening the audience with information that they can easily follow. This requires that the presentation be given in a seamless and logical manner. Once the presentation portion of the task has been completed, the group needs to review the presentations for grammar and stylistic errors so that they may improve on the next TBL assignment. Thus the use of these two language learning techniques which involve reading, writing, and speaking skills, if taught by an instructor who is committed to this language learning process, can I believe, accelerate English language fluency to a significant degree.

From my limited experience teaching at a Thai university, second-year students, I feel that they exhibit too much timidity in their classroom participation. As someone who has studied five languages, my experience is that it is genuinely necessary to be aggressive and assertive in learning to speak; sitting back and taking a very reticent approach in class participation makes language learning and teaching close to impossible (Kirkpatrick, 2012). This is a cultural hurdle that can only be surmounted over time and the teacher being persuasive, firm and sensitive at the same time. I would hope that mind -mapping and TBL as contemporary, group dynamica might give the more timid students that extra motivation that might extricate them from their linguistic shell and bravely step forward without worrying about making mistakes. Many students feel that making verbal errors in front of their classmates is a situation that they have a hard time reconciling, and in the extreme, humiliating. This is a mental impediment that must be bridged in order to steadily improve one's fluency in any language.

When it comes to preparing a teacher to correctly utilize mind- mapping and TBL, it will be necessary to provide some needed professional development training perhaps during part of the university summer session. One necessary skill a teacher must master is that of learning to prepare lesson plans. To keep the students' motivation at a peak level, it is necessary to come up with an assortment of materials that will hold the students' interest during the class. For this, it would be best to come up with materials from the internet that are fresh and current. To change from a teacher-centered language learning paradigm to a student-centered one will also entail the writing of a new, language curriculum which, of course, will necessitate the writing of , at least initially, an in-house text that will be flexible enough to institute changes as this experiment goes forward. If successful, this new approach to language could be presented to other universities for their evaluation.

Appendix A

”Planning a Holiday”



Source: Edward Miccio

Note: These are just a few of the sub-topics that can be used in the holiday planning process that the group may consider. During the brainstorming process, the group needs to come to a consensus concerning each of the aspects; e.g., selecting the destination, the kind of accommodation to stay at, what sightseeing places they want to visit, etc. This exercise could be used with pre-intermediate and intermediate level students.

Appendix B (part 1)

Topic: Should kindergarten start at 5 or 6 years of age ? (Debate)

Group A: Start at 5 years of age.

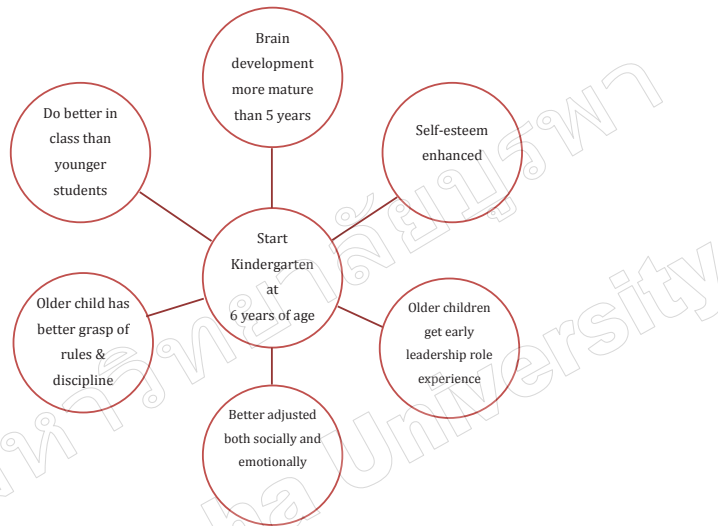


Source: Edward Miccio

Note: This can be a topic of debate between Groups A and B. This will necessitate being able to justify their respective opinions. This might be more suitable for intermediate and advanced level students.

Appendix B (part 2)

Group B: Start at 6 years of age.



Source: Edward Miccio

Appendix C

“Preparing a Marketing Plan”



Appendix E



Source: Second-year students

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