

The use of pre-lesson tasks to promote self-directed learning in junior secondary levels

Target:

S1 English Language

Rationale:

Assigning pre-lesson tasks to students is a common practice in English classrooms. A well-designed pre-lesson task would enhance the teaching and learning effectiveness. The following could be seen as some guiding principles for teachers when designing pre-lesson tasks:

- i) Set a clear purpose of the pre-lesson task;
- ii) Keep the task short, concise and of interest to students; and
- iii) Ensure the alignment of the pre-lesson task and classroom teaching.

Strategies and Impacts:

i) Set a clear purpose of the pre-lesson task

In the topic related to travel, where students have to learn names of countries and cities. Apart from spelling the names, one other difficult part for a majority of students appeared to be the matching of (capital) cities to respective countries. Students would write ‘Rome is a city in France’. Hence, it is very clear that the design of the task is to check students’ prior knowledge of city and its country as along as to extend the learning of more able students.

ii) Keep tasks short, concise and of interest to students

The reason for keeping tasks short, concise and of interests to students are in fact some strategies to develop students’ will and skill, important qualities that self-directed learners should possess.

To develop students’ will, learning diversity has to be taken into account. Tasks that are short, concise and allow students choices serve the purpose. As shown in Fig.1, Part A of the pre-learning task demands students to find out ten countries on the map. These ten countries, which come from the core vocabulary list, are carefully selected by teachers. All students, including the less able students, are expected to know these ten countries.

While Part B requires students to write ten cities among the cities shown on the map. This task here allows certain autonomy. i) Students are allowed to write more than one cities in one country; ii) the instruction “name at least 10 cities” encourages more able students to challenge themselves and include more cities; iii) the pictures of the landmarks on the map serve as clues for students, nonetheless, they are not required to write only those landmarks.

Fig. 1 Pre-lesson task

A. Write down the names of the countries labeled on the map.

A - China	B	C	D
E	F	G	H
I	J		

B. For those countries labeled on the map, name at least 10 cities among them.

Country / City	Country / City	Country / City
e.g. China - Shenzhen	China -	Japan -

C. Name any three famous landmarks in the countries labeled on the map.

e.g. The Great Wall of China			
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iii) Alignment of pre-lesson task to classroom teaching

To further enhance students' learning, classroom tasks / activities are designed to follow-up on the pre-lesson tasks done.

Fig. 2 shows the task (Activity 2) which is a revision of the cities that teachers had expected most students would have written on the pre-lesson tasks. A few less commonly cited cities were included to i) serve as teaching materials; ii) pose as a challenge to the more able students in class. Activity 3 is an assessment 'disguises' as an activity to check students' learning. The key is the debriefing done after the dictation. Teacher would find out where common mistakes were made and then further helps students clarify. Again, students who did the running and look at the list had a choice in which country / city to pick. This would cause less pressure and embarrassment to less able students who could be stuck if more difficult questions were assigned.

Fig. 2 Lesson Tasks / Activities

Activity 2	<p>4) Play the 'City' memory game. (~15 mins)</p> <p>i) *Show the slides once quickly. Ask Ss to note down which city and country it is. (Individual work)</p> <p>ii) Give students 1 – 2 minutes to tidy up their answers. (Let students think about the answers.)</p> <p>iii) Get students into groups and discuss the answers. (Peer learning)</p> <p>iv) Report back in groups. (Teacher spots the difficult parts for students.)</p> <p><i>* For less able class, show the slides twice. First time slower and second time faster.</i></p>
Activity 3	<p>5) Teacher leads a running dictation (~15 mins)</p> <p>i) Students from each group take turns to come out and look at a list of country and city names.</p> <p>ii) The students go back and co-operate with their group members to do the dictation of the list of names and categorize the names into the proper group – countries / cities</p> <p>iii) The fastest group wins.</p>

Acknowledgement:

Lui Cheung Kwong Lutheran College