1 What is task-based language teaching?

Introduction and overview

The concept of 'task' has become an important element in syllabus design, classroom teaching and learner assessment. It underpins several significant research agendas, and it has influenced educational policy-making in both ESL and EFL settings.

Pedagogically, task-based language teaching has strengthened the following principles and practices:

- A needs-based approach to content selection.
- An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language.
- The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation.
- The provision of opportunities for learners to focus not only on language but also on the learning process itself.
- An enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning.
- The linking of classroom language learning with language use outside the classroom.

In this chapter, I will map out the terrain for the rest of the book. I will firstly define 'task' and illustrate the ways in which it will be used. I will then relate it to communicative language teaching and set it within a broader curriculum framework, as well as spelling out the assumptions about pedagogy drawn on by the concept. In the final part of the chapter I will look at the impact of the concept on the learner, on one hand, and on institutional policy and practice on the other.

Defining 'task'

Before doing anything else, I need to define the central concept behind this book. In doing so, I will draw a basic distinction between what I will call real-world or target tasks, and pedagogical tasks: target tasks, as the name implies, refer to uses of language in the world beyond the classroom; pedagogical tasks are those that occur in the classroom.

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Long (1985: 89) frames his approach to task-based language teaching in terms of target tasks, arguing that a target task is:

> a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward. Thus examples of tasks include painting a fence, dressing a child, filling out a form, buying a pair of shoes, making an airline reservation, borrowing a library book, taking a driving test, typing a letter, weighing a patient, sorting letters, making a hotel reservation, writing a cheque, finding a street destination and helping someone across a road. In other words, by 'task' is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play and in between.

The first thing to notice about this definition is that it is non-technical and non-linguistic. It describes the sorts of things that the person in the street would say if asked what they were doing. (In the same way as learners, if asked why they are attending a Spanish course, are more likely to say, 'So I can make hotel reservations and buy food when I'm in Mexico,' than 'So I can master the subjunctive.') Related to this is the notion that, in contrast with most classroom language exercises, tasks have a non-linguistic outcome. Non-linguistic outcomes from Long's list above might include a painted fence, possession – however temporary – of a book, a driver's licence, a room in a hotel, etc. Another thing to notice is that some of the examples provided may not involve language use at all (it is possible to paint a fence without talking). Finally, individual tasks may be part of a larger sequence of tasks; for example the task of weighing a patient may be a sub-component of the task 'giving a medical examination'.

When they are transformed from the real world to the classroom, tasks become pedagogical in nature. Here is a definition of a pedagogical task:

> . . . an activity or action which is carried out as the result of processing or understanding language (i.e. as a response). For example, drawing a map while listening to a tape, listening to an instruction and performing a command may be referred to as tasks. Tasks may or may not involve the production of language. A task usually requires the teacher to specify what will be regarded as successful completion of the task. The use of a variety of different kinds of tasks in language teaching is said to make language teaching more communicative . . . since it provides a purpose for a classroom activity which goes beyond the practice of language for its own sake.
>
> (Richards, *et al.* 1986: 289)

In this definition, we can see that the authors take a pedagogical perspective. Tasks are defined in terms of what the learners will do in class rather

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than in the world outside the classroom. They also emphasize the impor-
tance of having a non-linguistic outcome.

Breen (1987: 23) offers another definition of a pedagogical task:

> . . . any structured language learning endeavour which has a
> particular objective, appropriate content, a specified working
> procedure, and a range of outcomes for those who undertake the
> task. 'Task' is therefore assumed to refer to a range of workplans
> which have the overall purposes of facilitating language learning –
> from the simple and brief exercise type, to more complex and
> lengthy activities such as group problem-solving or simulations
> and decision-making.

This definition is very broad, implying as it does that just about anything
the learner does in the classroom qualifies as a task. It could, in fact, be
used to justify any procedure at all as 'task-based' and, as such, is not
particularly helpful. More circumscribed is the following from Willis
(1996), cited in Willis and Willis (2001): a classroom undertaking '. . .
where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative
purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome'. Here the notion of
meaning is subsumed in 'outcome'. Language in a communicative task is
seen as bringing about an outcome through the exchange of meanings.
(p. 173).

Skehan (1998), drawing on a number of other writers, puts forward
five key characteristics of a task:

- meaning is primary
- learners are not given other people's meaning to regurgitate
- there is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities
- task completion has some priority
- the assessment of the task is in terms of outcome.

(See also Bygate, Skehan and Swain 2001, who argue that the way we
define a task will depend to a certain extent on the purposes to which the
task is used.)

Finally, Ellis (2003: 16) defines a pedagogical task in the following
way:

> A task is a workplan that requires learners to process language
> pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be
> evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate
> propositional content has been conveyed. To this end, it requires
> them to give primary attention to meaning and to make use of
> their own linguistic resources, although the design of the task may
> predispose them to choose particular forms. A task is intended to
> result in language use that bears a resemblance, direct or indirect,

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to the way language is used in the real world. Like other language activities, a task can engage productive or receptive, and oral or written skills and also various cognitive processes.

My own definition is that a pedagogical task is a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right with a beginning, a middle and an end.

While these definitions vary somewhat, they all emphasize the fact that pedagogical tasks involve communicative language use in which the user's attention is focused on meaning rather than grammatical form. This does not mean that form is not important. My own definition refers to the deployment of grammatical knowledge to express meaning, highlighting the fact that meaning and form are highly interrelated, and that grammar exists to enable the language user to express different communicative meanings. However, as Willis and Willis (2001) point out, tasks differ from grammatical exercises in that learners are free to use a range of language structures to achieve task outcomes – the forms are not specified in advance.

Reflect
Drawing on the above discussion, come up with your own definition of a pedagogical 'task'.

In the rest of the book, when I use the term 'task' I will be referring, in general, to pedagogical tasks. When the term refers specifically to target or real-world tasks, this will be indicated.

Broader curricular consideration

'Curriculum' is a large and complex concept, and the term itself is used in a number of different ways. In some contexts, it is used to refer to a particular program of study, as in 'the science curriculum' or 'the mathematics curriculum'. In other contexts, it is synonymous with 'syllabus'. Over fifty years ago, Ralph Tyler, the 'father' of modern curriculum study, proposed a 'rational' curriculum model that is developed by firstly identifying goals and objectives (syllabus), then listing, organizing and grading learning experiences (methodology), and finally finding means

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for determining whether the goals and objectives have been achieved (assessment and evaluation) (Tyler 1949). I have placed 'rational' in quotation marks because Tyler's approach is not necessarily more rational than previous curricular proposals. However, it was a clever rhetorical ploy because critics of the model could be accused of 'irrationality'.

Another perspective was presented in the mid-1970s by Lawrence Stenhouse who argued that at the very minimum a curriculum should offer the following:

> A. *In planning*
> 1. Principles for the selection of content – what is to be learned and taught.
> 2. Principles for the development of a teaching strategy – how it is to be learned and taught.
> 3. Principles for the making of decisions about sequence.
> 4. Principles on which to diagnose the strengths and weaknesses of individual students and differentiate the general principles 1, 2 and 3 above to meet individual cases.
>
> B. *In empirical study*
> 1. Principles on which to study and evaluate the progress of students.
> 2. Principles on which to study and evaluate the progress of teachers.
> 3. Guidance as to the feasibility of implementing the curriculum in varying school contexts, pupil contexts, environments and peer-group situations.
> 4. Information about the variability of effects in differing contexts and on different pupils and an understanding of the causes of the variations.
>
> C. *In relation to justification*
> A formulation of the intention or aim of the curriculum which is accessible to critical scrutiny.
>
> (Stenhouse 1975: 5)

Stenhouse's perspective provided a refreshing antidote to the rather mechanistic 'rational' curriculum model because it emphasized process as well as product, elevated the teacher as an important agent of curriculum development and change, and highlighted the importance of seeing the curriculum in action. The focus on process and action make it an interesting model for those interested in task-based curriculum proposals. (I should note parenthetically that even though his model is comprehensive, it is by no means exhaustive. It says little, for example, about curriculum management and monitoring.)

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My own approach to curriculum has been strongly influenced by Stenhouse. I draw a distinction between the curriculum as plan, the curriculum as action, and the curriculum as outcome. The curriculum as plan refers to the processes and products that are drawn up prior to the instructional process. These will include plans and syllabuses, text-book, and other resources, as well as assessment instruments. The curriculum as action refers to the moment-by-moment realities of the classroom as the planned curriculum is enacted. The curriculum as outcome relates to what students actually learn as a result of the instructional process.

The curriculum as plan consists of three elements: syllabus design, which is concerned with selecting, sequencing and justifying content; methodology, which is concerned with selecting, sequencing and justifying learning experiences; and assessment/evaluation, which is concerned with the selection of assessment and evaluation instruments and procedures.

This tripartite division works well enough in traditional approaches to curriculum. However, after the emergence of communicative language teaching (CLT), the distinction between syllabus design and methodology becomes more difficult to sustain. At the initial design stage, one needs to specify both the content (the ends of learning) and the tasks and learning procedures (the means to those ends) in an integrated way. This suggests a broad approach to curriculum in which concurrent consideration is given to content, procedure, and evaluation. In the next chapter, I will set out a framework for doing this.

Reflect
To what extent does the curriculum you currently use, or a curriculum with which you are familiar, contain the different dimensions described in this section? In terms of the dimensions, where are the gaps in your curriculum? What are the strengths?

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Although it is not always immediately apparent, everything we do in the classroom is underpinned by beliefs about the nature of language, the nature of the learning process and the nature of the teaching act. These days it is generally accepted that language is more than a set of grammatical rules, with attendant sets of vocabulary, to be memorized. It is a dynamic resource for creating meaning. Learning is no longer seen

simply as a process of habit formation. Learners and the cognitive processes they engage in as they learn are seen as fundamentally important to the learning process. Additionally, in recent years, learning as a social process is increasingly emphasized, and sociocultural theories are beginning to be drawn on in addition to (or even in preference to) cognitive theories (see, for example, Lantolf 2000).

Another distinction that has existed in general philosophy and epistemology for many years is that between 'knowing that' and 'knowing how' (see, for example, Ryle 1949), that is, between knowing and being able to regurgitate sets of grammatical rules, and being able to deploy this grammatical knowledge to communicate effectively. In the days of audiolingualism 'knowing that' was eschewed in favour of 'knowing how'. However, now, the pursuit of both forms of knowledge are considered valid goals of language pedagogy. (This issue is taken up in greater depth in Chapter 5.)

These views underpin communicative language teaching. A great deal has been said and written about CLT in the last 30 years, and it is sometimes assumed that the approach is a unitary one, whereas in reality it consists of a family of approaches. And, as is the case with most families, not all members live harmoniously together all of the time. There are squabbles and disagreements, if not outright wars, from time to time. However, no one is willing to assert that they do not belong to the family.

The basic insight that language can be thought of as a tool for communication rather than as sets of phonological, grammatical and lexical items to be memorized led to the notion of developing different learning programs to reflect the different communicative needs of disparate groups of learners. No longer was it necessary to teach an item simply because it is 'there' in the language. A potential tourist to England should not have to take the same course as an air traffic controller in Singapore or a Columbian engineer preparing for graduate study in the United States. This insight led to the emergence of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) as an important subcomponent of language teaching, with its own approaches to curriculum development, materials design, pedagogy, testing and research.

The CLT view of language as action, was nicely captured by Savignon (1993), one of the key architects of CLT, in a state-of-the-art survey article in which she wrote:

> In Europe, during the 1970s, the language needs of a rapidly
> increasing group of immigrants and guest workers, and a rich
> British linguistic tradition that included social as well as linguistic
> context in description of language behavior, led to the Council
> of Europe development of a syllabus for learners based on

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> functional–notional concepts of language use and . . . a threshold
> level of language ability was described for each of the languages of
> Europe in terms of what learners should be able to *do* with the
> language (van Ek 1975). Functions were based on assessment of
> learner needs and specified the end result, the *product*, of an
> instructional program. The term *communicative* was used to
> describe programs that used a functional–notional syllabus based
> on needs assessment, and the language for specific purposes (LSP)
> movement was launched.
>
> (Savignon 1993: 37)

While the ESP/LSP movement initially focused on the end *product* of
instructional programs, CLT also forced a re-evaluation of learning *processes*. This created a dilemma for syllabus designers whose job it was to
produce ordered lists of items graded according to difficulty, frequency
or pedagogical convenience. With the emergence of CLT, these may no
longer have been principally structural or lexical lists, but lists of functions and notions. However, lists they remained. Processes belonged to
the domain of methodology. They were someone else's business. They
could not be reduced to lists of items. For a time, it seemed, the syllabus
designer was out of business.

One of the clearest articulations of this dilemma came from Breen. He
suggested that the solution to the syllabus designer's dilemma and the
resolution to the dichotomy between language product and learning
process were to see them as one and the same. Rather than separating
the destination and the route of language learning, they should be seen
as indistinguishable. Pedagogy should:

> . . . prioritize the route itself; a focusing upon the means towards
> the learning of a new language. Here the designer would give
> priority to the changing process of learning and the potential of
> the classroom – to the psychological and social resources applied
> to a new language by learners in the classroom context. . . . a
> greater concern with capacity for communication, with the activity
> of learning a language viewed as important as the language itself,
> and with a focus upon means rather than predetermined
> objectives, all indicate priority of process over content.
>
> (Breen 1984: 52–3)

Breen is suggesting that when we place communication at the centre of
the curriculum the goal of that curriculum (individuals who are capable
of communicating in the target language) and the means (classroom procedures that develop this capability) begin to merge: learners learn to
communicate by communicating. The ends and the means become one
and the same.

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Under this scenario, what happens to the product-oriented approach which emphasizes the listing of structures and the specifying of end-of-course objectives? Can a place be found for them in CLT? This issue is particularly crucial when considering the place of grammar. For some time after the rise of CLT, the status of grammar in the curriculum seemed rather uncertain. Some linguists maintained that an explicit focus on form was unnecessary, that the ability to use a second language ('knowing how') would develop automatically if learners focused on meaning in the process of completing tasks. (See, for example, Krashen 1981, 1982). In recent years, this view has come under challenge (Swain 1985, 1996; Doughty and Williams 1998), and there is now widespread acceptance that a focus on form has a place in the classroom. It is also accepted that grammar is an essential resource in making meaning (Halliday 1994; Hammond and Derewianka 2001). At present, debate centres on the extent to which a grammar syllabus should be embedded in the curriculum, some arguing that a focus on form should be an incidental activity in the communicative classroom (Long and Robinson 1998). These issues are taken up and elaborated on in Chapter 5.

Littlewood (1981) draws a distinction between a strong and a weak interpretation of CLT. The strong interpretation eschews a focus on form, while a weak interpretation acknowledges the need for such a focus. In making his case for a weak interpretation, Littlewood argues that the following skills need to be taken into consideration.

- The learner must attain as high a degree as possible of linguistic competence. That is, he must develop skill in manipulating the linguistic system, to the point where he can use it spontaneously and flexibly in order to express his intended message.
- The learner must distinguish between the forms he has mastered as part of his linguistic competence, and the communicative functions which they perform. In other words, items mastered as part of a linguistic system must also be understood as part of a communicative system.
- The learner must develop skills and strategies for using language to communicate meaning as effectively as possible in concrete situations. He must learn to use feedback to judge his success, and, if necessary, remedy failure by using different language.
- The learner must become aware of the social meaning of language forms. For many learners, this may not entail the ability to vary their own speech to suit different social circumstances, but rather the ability to use generally acceptable forms and avoid potentially offensive ones.

(Littlewood 1981: 6)

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> **Reflect**
> What do you see as the role of grammar in the communicative
> language curriculum? Do you think that an explicit focus on
> grammar should be part of the learning experience? If so, do you
> think that the selection and grading of linguistic elements
> (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation features, function, notions,
> etc.) should be carried out separately from the selection and
> sequencing of learning tasks?

My own position is that the curriculum needs to take account of both
means and ends, and must, in consequence, incorporate both content
and process. In the final analysis, it does not matter whether those
responsible for specifying learning tasks are called 'syllabus designers' or
'methodologists'. What matters is that both processes and outcomes are
taken care of and that there is compatibility between them. Whatever the
position taken, there is no doubt that the development of CLT has had
a profound effect on both methodology and syllabus design, and has
greatly enhanced the status of the concept of 'task' within the curricu-
lum.

This last comment raises the question of the relationship between
communicative language teaching and task-based language teaching.
Are the terms synonymous? If so, why have two terms for the same
notion? If not, wherein lies the difference? The answer is that CLT is a
broad, philosophical approach to the language curriculum that draws on
theory and research in linguistics, anthropology, psychology and sociol-
ogy. (For a review of the theoretical and empirical roots of CLT, see
Savignon 1993). Task-based language teaching represents a realization
of this philosophy at the levels of syllabus design and methodology.
Other realizations that could fairly claim to reside within the CLT family
include content-based instruction (Brinton 2003), text-based syllabuses
(Feez 1998), problem-based learning, and immersion education
(Johnston and Swain 1997). It is also possible to find essentially
grammar-based curricula that fit comfortably within the overarching
philosophy of CLT. This is particularly true of curricula based on genre
theory and systemic-functional linguistics (Burns 2001; Hammond and
Derewianka 2001).

Alternative approaches to syllabus design

In a seminal publication in 1976, David Wilkins suggested a basic dis-
tinction between what he called 'synthetic' approaches to syllabus design

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