

# 1 *Introduction: Task-based language teaching in a nutshell*

Kris Van den Branden

## 1 Introduction

For the past 20 years, task-based language teaching (TBLT) has attracted the attention of second language acquisition (SLA) researchers, curriculum developers, educationalists, teacher trainers and language teachers worldwide. To a great extent, the introduction of TBLT into the world of language education has been a ‘top-down’ process. The term was coined, and the concept developed, by SLA researchers and language educators, largely in reaction to empirical accounts of teacher-dominated, form-oriented second language classroom practice (Long & Norris, 2000). In their seminal writings, Long (1985) and Prabhu (1987), among others, supported an approach to language education in which students are given functional tasks that invite them to focus primarily on meaning exchange and to use language for real-world, non-linguistic purposes. Twenty years later, we have reached the stage where volumes that synthesize what we know about how TBLT can promote language learning are being published (Bygate *et al.*, 2001; Ellis, 2003; Lee, 2000; Nunan, 2005).

However, much of the research concerning TBLT has been conducted under laboratory conditions or in tightly controlled settings. Furthermore, most of the research has been psycholinguistic in nature, inspired by a desire to elaborate our knowledge of how people acquire a second language. In SLA research, tasks have been widely used as vehicles to elicit language production, interaction, negotiation of meaning, processing of input and focus on form, all of which are believed to foster second language acquisition. Far less empirical research has been carried out where tasks have been used as the basic units for the organization of educational activities in intact language classrooms. This leaves us with the crucial question: does TBLT work for teachers and learners in the classroom as well as it does for SLA researchers? Further, is TBLT more than a fascinating pedagogical approach that looks good and convincing on paper? Can it really inspire language teachers when they prepare their lessons or

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does it only frighten them because of the high demands it places on them and on their learners? Is TBLT compatible with prevailing classroom practices, with teachers' and learners' subjective beliefs of what makes good language education? How, for instance, does a teacher who has been using a traditional 'Focus-on-form' approach for 15 years react to TBLT? How do learners react to the idea of no longer having the particulars of grammar spelled out before being confronted with a speaking task? Does TBLT work as well for children as for adults? Can it be implemented in classes of 25 students with a wide range of cultural backgrounds and different levels of language proficiency? And how does one write a task-based syllabus covering six years of primary school? How, in the latter case, does the syllabus developer select, order and sequence some 720 tasks?

These are some of the many questions that are raised in this volume. In this introductory chapter, I will first summarize the rationale behind task-based language teaching. In the second part of this chapter, I will describe how this volume is organized and how each of the chapters contributes to answering the above-mentioned questions with regard to the implementation of TBLT in the second language classroom.

## 2 Task-based language teaching: general principles

When it comes to designing a second language curriculum (defined here as an educational programme describing what is to be taught to, and/or what should be learnt by, a particular group of learners), or a second language syllabus (i.e. a collection of tasks or activities aimed to assist the teacher in organizing classroom activity), there are three basic questions that need to be answered:

- 1 What particular language learning goals need to be reached by the learner?
- 2 How can educational activities be designed and organized in order to stimulate and support learners into reaching these language learning goals?
- 3 How will the students' learning processes and outcomes be assessed and followed up?

At the most general level, the answer to the first question, which refers to *what* is to be taught, will be basically the same for most courses that are currently being designed. Ultimately, all modern language courses aim to develop learners' ability to use the target language in real communication. However, this overarching goal needs to be broken down into more concrete and operational goals

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that can guide the design of the different components of a curriculum or syllabus, down to the level of separate lesson activities. At this more practical level, vast differences emerge. A key distinction can be made between curricula/syllabuses that formulate lower-level goals in terms of linguistic content (i.e. elements of the linguistic system to be acquired) and curricula/syllabuses that formulate lower-level goals in terms of language use (i.e. the specific kinds of things that people will need be able to do with the target language). Task-based curricula/syllabuses belong to the second category: they formulate operational language learning goals not so much in terms of which particular words or grammar rules the learners will need to acquire, but rather in terms of the purposes for which people are learning a language i.e. the tasks that learners will need to be able to perform.

But what, then, is a task? In the literature, various definitions have been offered that differ quite widely in scope and formulation (for overviews see Bygate *et al.*, 2001; Ellis, 2003; Johnson, 2003; Kumaravadivelu, 1993; Shehadeh, 2005), up to a point where almost anything related to educational activity can now be called a ‘task’. Clearly, in order to prevent the literature base on tasks and task-based language learning becoming even more fuzzy and overwhelming than it already has become, clear definitions of what authors mean when they use the word ‘task’ are necessary.

Some of the differences in the available definitions arise from the fact that, as a concept, the word ‘task’ can be used for different purposes (Bygate *et al.*, 2001): in terms of the three basic questions guiding curriculum/syllabus design that I raised above, most of the available definitions apply to the second question primarily, and some even exclusively – what should educational activities look like in order to enhance language learning? I will discuss these below. If we focus on the first question which is concerned with establishing language learning goals, only a limited number of definitions are relevant. The definitions of ‘task’ that are most informative in this respect are listed in Table 1 overleaf.

The definitions in Table 1 have much in common. They emphasize that tasks are activities (‘things people do’) and that these activities are goal-directed. Since we are dealing with language learning in this volume, some reference to language also needs to be included in our definition. This we find in the definitions proposed by Bachman & Palmer (1996) and Bygate *et al.* (2001), who stress that even though the goal that the learner aims to achieve need not be linguistic (e.g. painting a fence), the task necessitates language use for its performance. In other words, painting a fence becomes a *language* task if it cannot be performed without some use of language (e.g. under-

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Table 1 Definitions of 'task' as language learning goals

Author	Definition
Long (1985)	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 . . . . In other words, by 'task' is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play, and in between. 'Tasks' are the things people will tell you they do if you ask them and they are not applied linguists.
Crookes (1986)	A piece of work or activity, usually with a specified objective, undertaken as part of an educational course, at work, or used to elicit data for research.
Carroll (1993)	Any activity in which a person engages, given an appropriate setting, in order to achieve a specifiable class of objectives.
Bachman & Palmer (1996)	An activity that involves individuals in using language for the purpose of achieving a particular goal or objective in a particular situation.
Bygate <i>et al.</i> (2001)	An activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective.

standing instructions given by a partner, reading the instructions on the paint pot). This leads to the definition below, one we will use throughout this volume when referring to tasks as language learning goals:

A task is an activity in which a person engages in order to attain an objective, and which necessitates the use of language.

According to this definition, using language is a means to an end: by understanding language input and by producing language output i.e. by interacting with other people in real-life situations through the use of language, the goals that the learner has in mind can be (better) achieved. Defining the language learning goals of a curriculum/syllabus, then, is basically a matter of describing the tasks the language learner needs to be able to perform and of describing the kind of language use that the performance of these tasks necessitates.

The second question that we raised above refers to *how* language learners can be stimulated and supported in order to develop the functional language proficiency they need to be able to perform

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target tasks. Since we are focusing on instructed second language acquisition in this volume, this brings us to the question of how educational activities for the second language classroom should be designed, sequenced and organized in order to facilitate second language learning. The key distinction we made earlier between a more 'linguistic' approach and a 'task-based' one applies equally here (Crookes & Gass, 1993; Long, 1985; Long & Crookes, 1992; Long & Norris, 2000). In linguistic, otherwise-called 'synthetic' (Wilkins, 1976) or 'Type A' (White, 1988) syllabuses, the basic units of analysis are elements of the linguistic system (sounds, morphemes, grammar rules, words and collocations, notions, functions): different pre-digested and preselected parts of the language are taught separately and step by step in a predetermined order, so that acquisition is regarded as a process of gradual accumulation of small pieces. In their seminal articles on task-based language teaching, Long and Crookes (1992, 1993) discuss a number of negative effects of a synthetic approach. First, as a direct result of the fact that the language the learner is exposed to is controlled from a purely linguistic perspective, 'linguistic' syllabuses are full of artificial and stilted language. Secondly, according to the same authors, this approach assumes a model of language acquisition that conflicts with SLA research and with what we know about language learning. For instance, research shows that people do not learn isolated items in L2 one at a time, in an additive, linear fashion, but rather as parts of complex mappings of form–function relationships. Furthermore, linguistic syllabuses often call for immediate target-like mastery of the 'form of the day', while SLA research shows that learners rarely move from zero to target-like mastery of new items in one step. In sum, linguistic syllabuses rely too much on the equation 'what is taught is what is learnt' (Prabhu, 1984, 1987), an equation that SLA research has proven to be simplistic.

In sharp contrast, task-based syllabuses do not chop up language into small pieces, but take holistic, functional and communicative 'tasks', rather than any specific linguistic item, as the basic unit for the design of educational activity:

It is claimed, rather, that (pedagogic) tasks provide a vehicle for the presentation of appropriate target language samples to learners – input which they will inevitably reshape via application of general cognitive processing capacities – and for the delivery of comprehension and production opportunities of negotiable difficulty. New form–function relationships in the target language are perceived by the learner as a

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result. The strengthening of the subset of those that are not destabilized by negative feedback, their increased accessibility and incorporation in more intricate associations in long-term memory, complexifies the grammar and constitutes SL development. (Long & Crookes, 1993: 39).

From a task-based perspective then, people not only learn language *in order to* make functional use of it, but also *by* making functional use of it (Van den Branden & Van Avermaet, 1995): if, for example, teachers aim to stimulate their learners' ability to understand and give road instructions, they should confront them with functional tasks in which the students are asked to produce and understand road instructions. As such, the traditional distinction between *syllabus* i.e. what is to be taught, and *methodology* i.e. how to teach, is blurred in TBLT because the same unit of analysis (task) is used (Long, 1985).

In Table 2, a number of definitions are listed that describe the key features of tasks as the basic unit for educational activity. Most of the definitions that were listed in Table 1 also apply here.

A number of the definitions in Table 2 emphasize or suggest that there should be a close link between the tasks performed by learners in the language classroom and in the outside world. The things learners do with the target language in the classroom (i.e. the classroom tasks) should be related to, or derived from, what the learners are supposed to be able to do with the target language in the real world (target tasks). In this respect, a preliminary needs analysis for establishing course content in terms of the real-world target tasks that learners need to be able to perform constitutes a necessary step in designing a TBLT curriculum or syllabus (Long & Crookes, 1993; Long & Norris, 2000; Long, 2005a). The above-mentioned definitions, however, remain vague on the exact relationship between target tasks and classroom tasks. Should classroom tasks be true copies of the target tasks or rather increasingly complex approximations to the target tasks (Long, 1985), or should (as Ellis's definition suggests) classroom tasks only result in a kind of language use that resembles that in the outside world, leaving open the option that pedagogic tasks differ in content from real-world target tasks? This, clearly, is one of the questions to which different responses are possible and which this volume will need to address.

Regarding the kind of language use that classroom tasks should give rise to, most of the definitions in Table 2 emphasize the primacy of meaning: the learner's attention should primarily be directed towards meaning exchange. Classroom tasks should facilitate

Table 2 Definitions of 'task' as an educational activity

Author	Definition
Richards, Platt & Weber (1985)	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, and 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 teaching more communicative . . . since it provides a purpose for classroom activity which goes beyond practice of language for its own sake.
Krahnke (1987)	The defining characteristic of task-based content is that it uses activities that the learners have to do for non-instructional purposes outside the classroom as opportunities for language learning. Tasks are distinct from other activities to the degree that they have non-instructional purposes.
Breen (1987)	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 purpose 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.
Prabhu (1987)	An activity which required learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought and which allowed teachers to control and regulate that process was regarded as a task.
Candlin (1987)	One of a set of differentiated, sequencable, problem-posing activities involving learners' cognitive and communicative procedures applied to existing and new knowledge in the collective exploration and pursuance of foreseen or emergent goals within a social milieu.
Nunan (1989)	A piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is primarily focused on meaning rather than form.

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Willis (1996)	Activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome.
Skehan (1998)	An activity in which: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● meaning is primary</li> <li>● there is some communication problem to solve</li> <li>● there is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities</li> <li>● task completion has some priority</li> <li>● the assessment of the task is in terms of outcome.</li> </ul>
Lee (2000)	(1) A classroom activity or exercise that has: (a) an objective obtainable only by the interaction among participants, (b) a mechanism for structuring and sequencing interaction, and (c) a focus on meaning exchange; (2) a language learning endeavor that requires learners to comprehend, manipulate, and/or produce the target language as they perform some set of workplans.
Bygate <i>et al.</i> (2001)	An activity, susceptible to brief or extended pedagogic intervention, which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective.
Bygate <i>et al.</i> (2001)	An activity, influenced by learner choice, and susceptible to learner reinterpretation, which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective.
Ellis (2003)	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 prepositional 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, 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.

meaningful interaction and offer the learner ample opportunity to process meaningful input and produce meaningful output in order to reach relevant and obtainable goals. In other words, tasks invite the learner to act primarily as a language *user*, and not as a language

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*learner*. Tasks are supposed to elicit the kinds of communicative behaviour (such as the negotiation for meaning) that naturally arises from performing real-life language tasks, because these are believed to foster language acquisition. Some of the definitions in Table 2 further point to the fact that the meaningful use of language should be regarded as a complex skill, which demands from the learners that they draw on their linguistic resources as well as their general cognitive resources. Since language use is facilitative of reaching all kinds of goals in the real world, task-based language teaching naturally evokes a wide diversity of cognitive operations that people need to perform in order to function in real life. As a result, in a task-based approach, the cognitive demands placed on the learner will be one of the factors determining task complexity (Robinson, 2001b).

For all its focus on meaning, task-based language teaching does not exclude a focus on form. In fact, according to some authors (Skehan, 1998; Long & Norris, 2000), the marriage of meaning and form constitutes one of the key features of TBLT.

Task-based language teaching . . . is an attempt to harness the benefits of a focus on meaning via adoption of an *analytic* syllabus, while simultaneously, through use of *focus on form* (not forms), to deal with its known shortcomings, particularly rate of development and incompleteness where grammatical accuracy is concerned. (Long & Norris, 2000: 599)

A number of arguments supporting the combination of focus on meaning and form can be inferred from the definitions in Table 2. Since the meaningful use of language will necessarily imply the establishment of relevant form–meaning mappings, the learner will need to manipulate and thus pay at least some (conscious or unconscious) attention to form. According to some authors (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Ellis, 2003; Long, 1998; Long and Norris, 2000; Skehan, 1998), task designers should manipulate tasks in such a way as to enhance the probability that language learners will pay attention to particular aspects of the language code in the context of a meaningful activity, because this is believed to strongly promote second language acquisition. More recent SLA research has corroborated these findings (DeKeyser, 2006; Doughty & Williams, 1998; Ellis, 2002; Long, 1991; Norris & Ortega, 2000; Robinson, 2001b; Samuda, 2001; Swain & Lapkin, 2001). As a result, much of the recent literature on task-based language teaching explores how focus on form can optimally be integrated into task-based classroom work and discusses whether this should be accomplished implicitly or explicitly, during task performance, before or after it, and so on.

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Nevertheless, many authors of the definitions in Table 2 stress the fact that tasks are merely workplans for mental activity (see also Breen, 1987; Murphy, 2003). Task designers can ask, demand or invite the learner to do meaningful things with language and meanwhile pay attention to particular forms, but they cannot force the learner into anything. The gap between the ‘task as workplan’ and the actual ‘task in process’ (Breen, 1987) can be wide. As a result, the desirable combination of focus on form and meaningful activity will often be the result of the interactional activity among learners, or between the teacher and the learners, as much as the result of careful construction and manipulation by task designers.

This applies equally to another feature of classroom tasks as set out in the definitions in Table 2 i.e. the emphasis on learner activity. Learners are set to work in task-based language teaching. They are asked or invited to reach certain goals and to make functional use of language in order to do so. In line with social-constructivist views on learning in general (Kaufman, 2004; Steffe & Gale, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978), language learning is regarded as:

- a an ‘active’ process that can only be successful if the learner invests intensive mental energy in task performance;
- b an ‘interactive’ process that can be enhanced by interaction with other learners and/or with the teacher.

In view of the above, it should come as no surprise that task-based language teaching has often been contrasted with language teaching methodologies in which the teacher takes up a dominant role, whether with regard to selecting, sequencing and presenting course content, regulating classroom interaction, evaluating task performance or other aspects of educational activity. In task-based language teaching, the learner takes up the central role: he is given a fair share of freedom and responsibility when it comes to negotiating course content, choosing linguistic forms from his own linguistic repertoire during task performance, discussing various options for task performance and evaluating task outcomes (Benson, 2001; Breen & Candlin, 1980; Nunan, 1988; Shohamy, 2001). Again, all this emphasizes that in the process of task design, the manipulation of task features in order to achieve particular outcomes should not be regarded in absolute terms. In the same vein, in TBLT, the teacher’s main role shifts to motivating learners to engage in natural communicative behaviour, supporting them as they try to perform tasks and evaluating the process of task performance as much as the eventual outcome (Dörnyei, 2002; Freeman & Richards, 1996; Richard-Amato, 2003; Samuda, 2001).