1 The Pedagogic Background to Task-Based Language Teaching

The overall purpose of the chapter is to introduce key issues in task-based language teaching (TBLT), which will be taken up in subsequent chapters. We first consider initial proposals for a task-based approach in the 1980s. We then examine how TBLT subsequently developed, focusing on the design of a task-based syllabus and the methodology for implementing tasks. We briefly consider how TBLT has been adapted to computer-mediated (CM) environments and also look at task-based assessment. We discuss what evaluation studies have shown about the effectiveness of TBLT and the problems that teachers face in implementing it. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the criticisms that have been levelled at TBLT.

Starting Points

The importance of including tasks in a language curriculum was established in the communicative language teaching (CLT) movement of the 1970s and 1980s. TBLT grew out of this movement, with further input from early research in second language acquisition (SLA), which led to a questioning of the structural approach to teaching languages where a language is broken down into bits to be taught sequentially one at a time.

CLT

CLT drew on theories of language that emphasized communicative competence (Hymes, 1971) and that viewed language as functional in nature (Halliday, 1973). These theories led to the recognition that ‘there is more to the business of communicating than the ability to produce grammatically correct utterances’ (Johnson, 1982) and to the idea of replacing a traditional structural syllabus with a notional syllabus (Wilkins, 1976). In other words, there was a move away from...
a ‘synthetic’ way of teaching founded on an inventory of grammatical structures to an ‘analytic’ approach based on language functions such as ‘expressing agreement or disagreement’ and semantic notions such as ‘time’ and ‘space’. However, the language teaching materials based on a notional syllabus (e.g. Abbs and Freebairn, 1982) did not differ greatly from those based on a structural syllabus. That is, the linguistic forms for expressing each notion were mainly presented in situations and then practised in controlled exercises. Thus, while the organizational framework of a language course had changed, the methodology had not.

There was, however, a growing recognition of the need for a communicative methodology. Johnson (1982), for example, advocated what he called the deep-end strategy, where ‘the student is placed in a situation where he may need to use language not yet taught’ so as to activate ‘the ability to search for circumlocutions when the appropriate language item is not known’ (p. 193). This called for communicative tasks where the learner’s use of language was judged not in terms of whether it was grammatically correct but in terms of whether the communicative outcome of the task was achieved.

CLT never developed into well-defined ‘method’. Howatt (1984) distinguished a weak version, where teaching content was defined in terms of the linguistic realizations of notions and functions, but the methodology remained essentially the same as in the traditional structural approach, and a strong version, where the content of a language programme was specified in terms of communicative tasks and the methodological focus was on fluency. TBLT grew out of the strong CLT approach.

**SLA Research**

The SLA research that started in the 1960s and 1970s fed into the emergence of TBLT. Cross-sectional studies of learners acquiring a second language (L2) naturalistically (e.g. Dulay and Burt, 1973) provided evidence that there was an acquisition order that was common to all learners irrespective of their first languages (L1) or their age. Furthermore, a very similar order was found in classroom learners, suggesting that instruction did not have a major impact on the developmental route learners followed. Longitudinal studies (e.g. Cancino, Rosansky and Schumann, 1978) showed that learners passed through a series of stages involving ‘transitional constructions’ en route to the target form. Progress was gradual and often very slow, and at any one stage of development considerable variability was evident in those constructions that had been acquired up to that point.
Furthermore, it was clear that learners did not set about achieving target-like use of grammatical structures in linear fashion. Rather, they worked on several structures concurrently. This research led to the claim that there was a ‘natural route’ for mastering the grammar of a language and that learners had their own ‘built-in syllabus’ for learning it (Corder, 1967).

Drawing on this research, Krashen (1985) argued that true proficiency in an L2 depends on ‘acquisition’, defined as ‘the subconscious process identical in all important ways to the process children utilize in acquiring their first language’ and not on ‘learning’, defined as ‘the conscious process that results in “knowing about” language’ (p. 1). *The Natural Approach* (Krashen and Terrell, 1983) constituted an attempt to apply Krashen’s ideas about how languages were ‘acquired’ to pedagogic practice. It emphasizes activities that focus learners’ primary attention on meaning and caters to incidental acquisition. TBLT is based on the same principle.

**Early TBLT Proposals**

‘Tasks’ figured in both early CLT and *the Natural Approach* but in neither were they conceived of as the units around which a complete language course could be built. It was not until the mid- to late 1980s that the first proposals for a task-based approach appeared. These early proposals (Long, 1985; Candlin, 1987; Breen, 1989) were largely programmatic in nature. They focused on the rationale for a task-based syllabus and outlined how to design and evaluate a task-based curriculum. Prabhu (1987) provided the first complete account of a task-based course while Nunan (1989) gave practical advice about how to design tasks.

**Rationale for TBLT**

These early proposals were based on:

- research in SLA (Long, 1985);
- general educational principles (Candlin and Breen);
- dissatisfaction with structural-based teaching and the intuition that the development of grammatical competence was best achieved through the effort to cope with communication (Prabhu);
- the utility of ‘task’ as a unit that integrates *what* learners will learn (i.e. the syllabus) with *how* they learn (i.e. methodology) (Nunan).

From the start, therefore, there were multiple inputs into the rationale for TBLT.
• Drawing on research in SLA, Long (1985) argued that ‘there is no reason to assume that presenting the target language as a series of discrete linguistic or sociolinguistic teaching points is the best, or even a way to get learners to synthesize the parts into a coherent whole’ (p. 79). He saw an approach based on tasks as providing an ‘integrated solution to both syllabus and methodological issues’ (p. 89).

• Candlin (1987) critiqued traditional approaches from an educational standpoint. He argued that they failed to ‘emphasize educational goals ... in their pursuit of cost-effective training’ (p. 16). Along with Breen (1989), he emphasized the importance of teachers and students jointly negotiating the content of a course and argued that tasks provided the best means for achieving this. Candlin claimed that an approach based on tasks would enable learners ‘to become more aware of their own personalities and social roles’ (p. 17), foster self-realization and self-fulfilment and enhance their self-confidence.

• Prabhu’s (1987) starting point was dissatisfaction with the Structural-Oral Situational Method which was dominant in his particular teaching context (India) at that time. He argued that ‘the development of competence in a second language requires not systematization of language input or maximization of planned practice, but rather the creation of conditions in which learners engage in an effort to cope with communication’ (p. 1) and that this could be best achieved by having students perform tasks.

• Nunan (1989) sought to provide teachers with a practical introduction to the design and use of tasks. He claimed that basing teaching on tasks avoided the traditional distinction between syllabus and methodology. Traditional syllabuses did have a role, but as checklists rather than as directives about what to teach. Thus the starting point was the selection of the task(s) for a particular lesson.

**Defining ‘Task’**

The early proposals for task-based teaching all provided definitions of a ‘task’ but these varied in a number of ways. Breen’s (1989) definition was the most encompassing. A task is ‘a structured plan for the provision of opportunities for the refinement of knowledge and capabilities entailed in a new language and its use during communication’. According to this definition, a task could be both a brief practice exercise and ‘a more complex workplan that requires spontaneous communication’. Other definitions emphasized four important aspects of a task:
A task is a meaning-focused activity. It requires learners to focus on meaning rather than form (Nunan, 1989).

A task does not specify the exact meaning-content to be addressed as this will be subject to modification when it is performed. The language needed to perform a task is negotiable as the task is performed.

A task should bear some resemblance to a task that people perform in real life. Long (1985) defined tasks as ‘the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play and in between’ (p. 89).

A task should have ‘a sense of completeness’ and ‘stand alone as a communicative act in its own right’ (Nunan, 1989, p. 10).

One of the problems with these early definitions is that they conflated two senses of ‘task’ – task-as-workplan and task-as-process (Breen, 1989). It was the failure to make this crucial distinction that led to the claim that the traditional distinction between ‘syllabus’ and ‘methodology’ loses relevance. We will argue later, however, that this distinction is very relevant to TBLT and that it is best to define task as a workplan.

**Classifying Tasks**

We find a mixed bag of suggestions for distinguishing different types of task in these early proposals. Candlin commented that it is not possible to ‘offer anything other than implicit suggestions that tasks might be catalogued under several distinct types’ (1987, p. 14) and that as a result ‘a typology is bound to be fuzzy-edged and at most a managerial convenience’ (p. 15). Long distinguished ‘target tasks’ (i.e. real-life tasks such as ‘selling an airline ticket’), ‘task types’ (i.e. general tasks such as ‘selling an item’), and ‘pedagogic tasks’ (i.e. the actual tasks that teachers and students work with). Nunan presented a number of task typologies drawn from different sources, the most useful of which is Prabhu’s (see Table 1.1). This is based on how the information in a task is handled by the participants.

**Grading and Sequencing Tasks**

The early proposals for TBLT identified a number of criteria for determining the difficulty of pedagogical tasks:

- The linguistic complexity of the input provided by a task.
- The amount of input provided in the task.
- The number of steps involved in the execution of a task.
- The degree of structure in the information presented or required by the task.
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Table 1.1 A typology of task types

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Type of task</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>Information gap</td>
<td>‘a transfer of given information from one person to another – or from one form to another, or from one place to another’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasoning gap</td>
<td>‘deriving some new information from given information through the processes of inference, deduction, practical reasoning, or a perception of relationships or patterns’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion gap</td>
<td>‘identifying and articulating a personal preference, feeling, or attitude in response to a given situation’.</td>
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- The number of objects, events or people that need to be distinguished when performing the task.
- The extent to which the task requires reference to present or past/future events.
- The extent to which reasons for actions or decisions need to be given.
- The intellectual challenge posed.
- The learners’ familiarity with the topic of the task.

It should be immediately apparent that while such factors can clearly influence the difficulty of individual tasks, they cannot be easily used to grade tasks. It is not evident, for example, how one factor should be balanced against others. Prabhu found that the grading and sequencing tasks in the Communicational Teaching Project was more a matter of intuition than precise measurement and therefore largely a matter of trial and error.²

Evaluating Tasks

The importance of evaluating tasks was also recognized in these early proposals for TBLT. Long made the point that the success of a task needs to be judged in terms of task accomplishment rather than target-like linguistic production. He suggested that specialists should assess whether learners had mastered the ability to perform a ‘target task’. Candlin proposed three general areas to be considered in evaluating the utility of a task – its diagnostic value, its implementability in the classroom and the extent to which it fits in with and leads to other tasks. Nunan offered the most detailed proposal in the form of a
checklist of questions to be asked about a task (see pp. 135–7). This list includes questions relating to the design of the task (e.g. ‘Is there an information-gap?’), its implementation (e.g. ‘What type of language is stimulated by the task?’), and the learners’ affective response to the task (e.g. ‘Does the task engage the learners’ interests?’). As with the other aspects of TBLT, these suggestions were insightful but clearly programmatic.

Subsequent Developments

Over time, the issues raised in the early proposals were built on and new issues emerged. The rationale for TBLT was further expanded to incorporate general educational principles. The thorny issue of the definition of a task was revisited. The assumption that the traditional distinction between syllabus and methodology was no longer applicable in TBLT was challenged as it became clear that the issues relating to the design and implementation of tasks remain distinct and thus warrant separate consideration.

Broadening the Rationale for TBLT

We have seen that the underpinnings of TBLT lay in CLT (the ‘strong version’) and in SLA research and theory. With the exception of Candlin (1987), little attention was initially paid to broader educational principles. One of the major developments that followed was an attempt to align TBLT with general theories of education. Samuda and Bygate (2008) drew on Dewey’s (1938) critique of the traditional classroom with its view of learning as the mastery of ready-made products and his emphasis on the importance of learning that connects with experience of the real world. They pointed to Bruner’s (1960) emphasis on ‘learning for use’ where the learner is positioned not just as a ‘student’ but as a ‘practitioner’. TBLT is highly compatible with the holistic, experience-driven pedagogies advocated by these prominent educationalists.

Defining ‘Task’

Definitions of tasks have proliferated over the years. Van den Branden (2006) reviewed a total of seventeen different definitions which he divided into two groups, depending on whether they were viewed as tasks in terms of language learning goals or educational activity. We do not find this proliferation of definitions helpful and argue that there is a need for a definition that is applicable across contexts and purposes.
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The problem in arriving at such a definition originates in the failure to distinguish task-as-workplan and task-as-process. This is evident in the meaning attached to the word ‘activity’, which figures in many of the definitions. This term is ambiguous as it can refer to both the actual materials that constitute a task (i.e. the workplan) or to the language use resulting from the performance of the task (i.e. the process). We argue that a task cannot be defined in terms of process as this is, to some extent, unpredictable. Moreover, from the perspective of course design as well as language testing and research, the starting point needs to be the task-as-workplan, namely the design materials that will create a context for the communicative use of the L2. Whether this is in fact achieved (i.e. whether the task-as-workplan results in the activity intended) is an important question which can only be answered by investigating the task-as-process.

We propose, therefore, a definition based on criteria that can be used to distinguish whether a given workplan is a task or not a task (i.e. an ‘exercise’). We nevertheless acknowledge that some workplans may satisfy some but not all the criteria and therefore can be more or less ‘task-like’. The criteria are listed in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2 Criteria for defining a task-as-workplan

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>The primary focus is on meaning</td>
<td>The workplan is intended to ensure that learners are primarily concerned with comprehending or/and producing messages for a communicative purpose (i.e. there is primary focus on meaning-making).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is some kind of gap</td>
<td>The workplan is designed in such a way as to incorporate a gap which creates a need to convey information, to reason or to express an opinion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners rely mainly on their own linguistic and non-linguistic resources</td>
<td>Learners need to draw on their existing linguistic resources (potentially both L1 and L2) and their non-linguistic resources (e.g. gesture; facial expressions) for comprehension and production. There is therefore no explicit presentation of language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is a clearly defined communicative outcome</td>
<td>The workplan specifies the communicative outcome of the task. Thus task accomplishment is to be assessed not in terms of whether learners use language correctly but in terms of whether the communicative outcome is achieved.</td>
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Source: Based on Ellis and Shintani (2014).
Issues Relating to Task Design

TASK TYPES

There is still no generally accepted way of classifying tasks. By and large, pedagogical accounts have continued to distinguish tasks in terms of the operations learners are required to carry out when they perform them. Willis (1996), for example, distinguished six types – listing, ordering and sequencing, comparing, problem solving, sharing personal experiences and creative. Other ways of classifying tasks have emerged from research that has investigated the communicative and cognitive processes involved in performing different tasks leading to a set of features (see Table 1.3) that may impact on the language a task elicits. Any particular task can be described in terms of the specific features it incorporates. For example, an information-gap task that requires one learner to provide detailed descriptions of a set of pictures.

Table 1.3 Features of different tasks

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Task type</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One way versus two-way</td>
<td>In a one-way information-gap task, one participant holds all the information that needs to be communicated and thus functions as the information-provider while the other functions primarily as the receiver of the information but may interact if communication becomes problematic. In a two-way task, the information is split between the participants so both need to function as the providers and receivers of the information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monologic versus dialogic</td>
<td>A monologic task places the burden of performing the task entirely on a single speaker and therefore involves a long, uninterrupted turn. A dialogic task is interactive and thus necessitates interaction between the participants and typically results in shorter turns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closed versus open</td>
<td>In a closed task there is single (or very limited set of) possible outcomes (i.e. solutions). In an open task there are a number of possible outcomes. A closed task is typically an information-gap task whereas an open task is typically an opinion-gap task.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convergent versus divergent</td>
<td>Opinion-gap tasks can require learners to converge on an agreed solution to the task or can allow learners to arrive at their own individual solutions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical mode</td>
<td>The task can involve describing, narrating, instructing, reporting or arguing.</td>
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in order for another learner to identify the objects referred to is one-way, monologic, closed, convergent and descriptive. An opinion-gap task where learners are given information about four people who need a heart transplant and have to decide which person will be given the one heart available is two-way, dialogic, open, potentially divergent and argumentative.

Another important distinction is between real-world and pedagogic tasks. The former are based on target tasks and so have situational authenticity. An example might be a task where two students take on the roles of hotel receptionist and prospective guest where the latter has to make a booking for a room based on the information provided by the former. A pedagogic task lacks situational authenticity but must still display interactional authenticity (i.e. result in the kind of natural language use found in the world outside the classroom). An example is the picture-description task described in the previous paragraph. An issue of some debate (considered below) is whether a task-based course should consist only of real-world tasks or whether pedagogic tasks also have a place.

A task can be input-based, requiring learners to simply process the oral or written information provided and demonstrate their understanding of it (for example by drawing a picture or making a model), or it can be output-based, requiring the learner to speak or write to achieve the task outcome. This distinction is important because, as Prabhu (1987) noted, beginner learners cannot be expected to use the L2 productively so task-based learning must initially be input-driven.

Tasks can also be unfocused or focused (Ellis, 2003). An unfocused task is intended to elicit general samples of language. In the early proposals for TBLT it was generally assumed that tasks would be unfocused. A focused task must satisfy the general criteria for a task but is designed to orientate learners to the use of a particular linguistic feature – typically but not necessarily a grammatical structure. This possibility was explored in an important article by Loschky and Bley-Vroman (1993). They suggested that a task could be designed in such a way that it made the processing of a particular grammatical structure:

1. ‘natural’ (i.e. the task lends itself, in some natural way, to the frequent use of the structure (p. 132),
2. ‘useful’ (i.e. the use of the structure is very helpful for performing the task) or
3. ‘essential’ (i.e. successful performance of the task is only possible if the structure is used).