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Chapter 1: Tasks in SLA and language pedagogy
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Tasks in language teaching

Like researchers, language teachers, materials writers, and course designers have not been slow to recognize the value of tasks. However, they have differed considerably in the use they have made of them. Some methodologists have simply incorporated tasks into traditional language-based approaches to teaching. Others, more radically, have treated tasks as units of teaching in their own right and have designed whole courses around them. These two ways of using tasks can be referred to respectively as *task-supported language teaching* and *task-based language teaching*. In both cases, tasks have been employed to make language teaching more communicative. Tasks, therefore, are an important feature of *communicative language teaching* (CLT). We will begin, by considering CLT and the roles that tasks play in it.

Communicative language teaching

CLT aims to develop the ability of learners to use language in real communication. Brown and Yule (1983) characterize communication as involving two general purposes –the interactional function, where language is used to establish and maintain contact, and the transactional function, where language is used referentially to exchange information. CLT, then, is directed at enabling learners to function interactionally and transactionally in an L2. In this respect, however, the goal of CLT is not so different from that of earlier methods such as the audiolingual or oral-situational method, which also claimed to develop the ability to use language communicatively. CLT, however, drew on very different models of language. Thus, whereas the earlier methods were based on a view of language as a set of linguistics systems (phonological, lexical, and grammatical), CLT drew on a functional model of language (Halliday's) and a theory of communicative competence (Hymes'). To adopt Widdowson's (1978) terms, whereas structural approaches to teaching focus on *usage*, i.e. the ability to use the language correctly, communicative language

teaching is directed at *use*, i.e. the ability to use language meaningfully and appropriately in the construction of discourse.

In fact, though, CLT is not a monolithic and uniform approach. Howatt (1984) distinguishes a "weak" and a "strong" version. The former is based on the assumptions that the components of communicative competence can be identified and systematically taught. In this respect, a weak version of CLT does not involve a radical departure from earlier methods as it still reflects what White (1988) refers to as a Type A approach to language teaching, i.e. an approach that is interventionist and analytic. Thus, instead of (or, perhaps in addition to) teaching learners the structural properties of language, a weak version of CLT proposes they be taught how to realize specific general notions such as "duration" and "possibility", and language functions such as "inviting" and "apologizing". The weak version of CLT is manifest in the proposals for notional/functional syllabuses developed by Wilkins (1976) and Van Ek (1976).

In contrast, a strong version of CLT claims that "language is acquired through communication" (Howatt 1984:279). That is, learners do not first acquire language as a structural system and then learn how to use this system in communication but rather actually discover the system itself in the process of learning how to communicate. The strong version of CLT, therefore, involves providing learners with opportunities to experience how language is used in communication. This approach reflects what White (1988) has called a Type B approach, i.e. an approach that is non-interventionist and holistic. It is evident in Krashen and Terrell's (1983) Natural Approach and also in the proposals for teaching centred on the use of tasks (Candlin 1987).

The distinction between a weak and a strong version of CLT parallels the distinction between task-supported language teaching and task-based language teaching. The weak version views tasks as a way of providing communicative practice for language items that have been introduced in a more traditional way. They constitute a necessary but not a sufficient basis for a language curriculum. The strong version sees tasks as a means of enabling learners to learn a language by experiencing how it is used in communication. In the strong version, tasks are both necessary and sufficient for learning. We will now explore these two ways of viewing tasks in language teaching in greater depth.

Task-supported language teaching

Teaching based on a linguistic content, whether this is specified in structural terms as a list of grammatical features or in notional/functional terms as in the weak version of CLT, has traditionally employed a methodological procedure consisting of present-practice-produce (PPP) (see Gover and Walters 1983 for a detailed account of this standard procedure). That is, a language item is first presented to the learners by means of examples with or without explanation. This item is then practiced in a controlled manner using what we have called “exercises”. Finally opportunities for using the item in free language production are provided. It is in this “production” stage that tasks have been employed. Implicit in PPP is the idea that it is possible to lead learners from controlled to automatic use of new language features by means of text-manipulation exercises that structure language for the learner followed by text-creation tasks where learners structure language for themselves (Batstone 1994).

The view of language learning that underlies this approach to language teaching has been criticized on a number of grounds. PPP views language as a series of “products” that can be acquired sequentially as “accumulated entities” (Rutherford 1987). However, SLA research has shown that learners do not acquire a language in this way. Rather they construct a series of systems, known as interlanguages, which are gradually grammaticized and restructured as learners incorporate new features. Furthermore, research on developmental sequences has shown that learners pass through a series of transitional stages in acquiring a specific grammatical feature such as negatives, often taking months or even years before they arrive at the target form of the rule. In other words, L2 acquisition is a “process” that is incompatible with teaching seen as the presentation and practice of a series of “products”.

There are practical problems with PPP as well. Clearly, the production stage calls for “grammar tasks”, i.e. tasks that will elicit the feature that is the target of the lesson (see p.17). However, as we have already seen, it is not easy to design tasks that require learners to use a targeted structure, as learners can always fall back on their strategic competence to circumvent it. One way out of this problem is to make clear to learners that they must use the target structure when they perform the task. However, this would encourage the learners to focus primarily on form which is the

result that the task then ceases to be a task as it has been defined in this chapter, and becomes instead an exercise.

However, despite these criticisms and problems and despite the doubts as to whether PPP can deliver what it promises, i.e. the ability to use the structures taught in real communication, it has proved highly durable. Skehan (1996b) suggests that this is because it affords teachers procedures for maintaining control of the classroom, thus reinforcing their power over students and also because the procedures themselves are eminently trainable.

It would be wrong, however, to characterize task-supported language teaching entirely in terms of PPP. It can take other forms. For example, Brumfit (1979) has suggested changing the sequence of stages of stages in PPP, beginning with the production stage and following up with the presentation and practice stages only if learners demonstrate their inability to use the targeted feature during the production stage. In this scheme, the task comes first and serves a diagnostic purpose. However, the problem remains that presenting and practicing features learners have failed to use correctly in production may not result in their acquisition if the learners are not developmentally ready to acquire them.

A better alternative might be to view language curriculum as consisting of two separate, unrelated strands, one of which follows traditional lines and other which is task based (see, for example, Allen's 1984 proposals for a syllabus with a variable focus). No attempt is made to use tasks to target specific linguistic features. Here tasks are seen not as a means by which learners acquire new knowledge or restructure their interlanguages but simply as a means by which learners can activate their existing knowledge of the L2 by developing fluency. This is clearly a lesser goal for tasks, as they do not replace exercises, but one that is compatible with a "process" view of language acquisition. Many of the early handbooks of tasks for teachers (for example, Winn-Bell Olsen 1977; Byrne and Rixon 1979) explicitly acknowledge that tasks are supplementary.

Task-based Language Teaching

Task-based language teaching constitutes a strong version of CLT. That is, tasks provide the basis for an entire language curriculum. We should note, however, that task-based teaching is not the only way of achieving a strong version of CLT. Stern (1992) offers a comprehensive classification of "communicative activities" That

includes field experiences, classroom management activities, inviting guest speakers, talking on topics related to the students' private life and on substantive topics drawn from other subjects on the school curriculum (as immersion programmes), and what he calls "communicative exercises", i.e. tasks. These are arranged in descending order with those closest to communicative reality at the top and those furthest removed at the bottom. Clearly, a strong version of CLT can be realized in a variety of ways, not just by tasks. Nevertheless, tasks can function as a useful device for planning a communicative curriculum, particularly in contexts where there are few opportunities for more authentic communicative experiences, for example, many FL situations.

One of the attractions of a task-based approach is that it appears to blur the traditional distinction between syllabus, i.e. a statement of what is to be taught, and methodology, i.e. a statement of how to teach. This distinction still underlies the weak version of CLT, where the syllabus is "communicative", i.e. a list of notions and functions, but the methodology is traditional and non-communicative, i.e. PPP. Weak CLT, like earlier structural approaches, is content-driven, methodology being tacked on as a way of "mediating" the syllabus (Widdowson 1990). In contrast, a task-based curriculum involves "an integrated set of processes involving, among other things, the specification of both *what* and *how* (Nunan 1989:1). In fact, it could be argued that "methodology becomes the central tenet of task-based pedagogy" (Kumaravadivelu 1993) in that no attempt is made to specify what the learner will learn, only how they will learn.

Despite these arguments, it is still useful to draw a distinction between the design of the syllabus and the choice of methodology in task-based teaching, as Skehan (1996a) has argued. Designing a task-based curriculum involves making decisions about what task learners will *do* (a question of selection) and, then, the order in which they will perform these tasks (a question of grading). Then, there are decisions to be made regarding the specific methodological procedures for teaching each task. Skehan (1996a) suggests that these can be organized in terms of pre-task, during-task, and after-task choices. Thus, whereas task-based teaching prescribes teaching methodology in broad terms, i.e. as "fluency" rather than "accuracy" (Brumfit 1984), there remains a whole range of micro-options to choose from. In this book, then, we will follow Skehan in continuing to distinguish between syllabus and methodology in task-based teaching. [. . . .]

So far, we have discussed task-based teaching as if it constituted a unified approach. In fact, a number of rather different approaches to using tasks in language pedagogy can be identified. We will now briefly consider these.

Perhaps one of the earliest proposals for task-based teaching is that associated with *humanistic language teaching*. Humanistic principles of education emphasize the achievement of students' full potential for growth by acknowledging the importance of the affective dimension in learning as well as the cognitive. Humanistic approaches encourage learners to recognize their feelings and put them to use by caring for and sharing with others, thereby increasing their own self-esteem and their motivation to learn. Moskowitz (1977) gives examples of what she calls "humanistic exercises" for language learning, which, in fact, have all the characteristics, of tasks as we have defined here. For example, "Identity Cards" asks students to pin on cards that give some personal information about themselves, for example "three adjectives that describe you". The students circulate while the teacher plays some music. When the music stops they choose a partner and talk about the information written on their cards. Moskowitz discussed the "affective" and "linguistic" purposes of such tasks. One of the "affective" purposes of "Identity Cards" is "to warm up a new group of students" while the linguistic purpose is "to practise asking and answering questions". There is no attempt to focus students' attention on the linguistic purpose, however. Moskowitz envisages these humanistic tasks as supplementary and reinforcing traditional materials, i.e. as contributing to task-supported language teaching. However, a more radical idea might be to structure an entire course around such tasks. Curran's (1972) "counseling language learning" can be seen as an attempt to construct a task-based method that incorporates humanistic principles.

A very different approach to task-based teaching is that embodied in the "procedural syllabus" proposed by Prabhu (1987). Prabhu instituted an innovative curriculum project in secondary schools in southern India whereby the structural-oral-situation method, which was the predominant method at that time, was replaced by a task-based method. He devised a series of meaning-focused activities consisting of pre-tasks, which the teacher completed with the whole class, followed by tasks where the students worked on similar activities on their own. These tasks provided a basis for what Prabhu calls "meaning-focused activity" that required students to understand, convey, or extend meaning, and where attention to language form is

only incidental. Thus, whereas Moskowitz's tasks are affective in orientation, Prabhu's tasks are primarily cognitive. For example, in one task the students were asked to find, name and describe specific locations on a map. In his book, *Second Language Pedagogy*, Prabhu discusses the different kinds of tasks he used in the project, the syllabus, and the methodological procedures the teachers followed.

A third approach to task-based teaching is the "process syllabus" advocated by Breen and Candlin. Whereas the procedural syllabus provides a specification of the tasks to be used in the classroom, the process syllabus is constructed through negotiation between the teacher and the students. (Breen 1987), for example, envisages a curriculum where learners carry out their own needs analysis, find and choose content appropriate to their needs and interests, plan procedures for working in the classroom, and reflect on and evaluate every aspect of the teaching-learning process. In this approach to teaching, then, there is no a priori syllabus. Rather the syllabus is constructed as the course is taught. The teacher, however, can call on a set of "curriculum guidelines" (Candlin 1987), which specify the range of options available to the participants. Task is the chosen unit for constructing the process syllabus because it constitutes a concept that both teachers and students can easily understand. However, as we have already seen, Breen's (1989) definition of task is broader than the one that informs this book as it incorporates both form-focused and meaning-focused activities. Been disputes the value of this distinction at the level of task-as-workplan, arguing that what really counts is the task-as-process, i.e. the actual processes that result from the performance of a task. Finally, tasks can be designed with a metacognitive focus for learner-training purposes. This can be achieved by constructing tasks that help learners to become aware of, reflect on, and evaluate their own learning styles and the strategies they use to learn. For example, Ellis and Sinclair (1989) offer a number of tasks aimed at making learners more effective and self-directed in their approach to learning an L2. For example, in one task learners fill in a questionnaire designed to help them understand what kind of language learner they are. In such tasks, language learning becomes the content that is talked about, an idea also proposed by Breen (1985). An alternative use of introducing a metacognitive dimension to tasks is to have learners appraise the tasks they are asked to perform by consciously asking such questions as "Why should I do the task?". "What kind of task is this?", and "How should I do the task?" (Wenden

1995). Here there are no learning-training tasks per se but rather learning training is integrated into content tasks.

A key pedagogical issue is how a task can be fitted into a cycle of teaching. Various proposals have been advanced (for example, Estaire and Zanon 1994; Willis 1996). Willis, for example, envisages a “task cycle” consisting of three broad phases: (1) pre-task, (2) task, and (3) language focus. There are opportunities for attention to form in all three phases. In the pre-task phase one option is for the teacher to highlight useful words and phrases. The task phase ends with a “report” where the learners comment on their performance of the task. In the final phase, learners perform consciousness-raising and practice activities directed at specific linguistic features that occurred in the input of the task and/or in the transcripts of fluent speakers doing the task. SLA researchers have begun to investigate the possibility of learners attending to form during the actual performance of the task.

These various approaches to task-based teaching reflect the issues that figure prominently in current discussion of language pedagogy –the role of meaning-based activity, the need for more learner-centred curricula, the importance of affective factors, the contribution of learner-training, and the need for some focus-on-form. Task-based pedagogy provides a way of addressing these various concerns and for this reason alone is attracting increasing attention.