New Ideas in English Education
英语教育新理念

主编　范革新

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前　言

　　人们常说在 21 世纪的中国,英语教学不仅是一种热门行业,同时也是一个新兴的产业,但很少有人能够说清楚,在中国这块有 5000 年历史的黑土地上,如何教会黑头发、黑眼睛的人流利地运用黄头发、蓝眼睛发明的语言。这种现象在此时、此地是件憾事,但从历史与文明发展的角度上看也是件好事,因为两种语言(和由这两种语言所造成的两种文化)之间的冲撞与融合所形成的学术性"尴尬",正说明了人类在进步,中国在发展,我们在努力。

　　自从中国改革、开放以来,中国的英语学者和英语教师们就从来就没有停止过探索。他们几乎把我们知道的所有的英语教学法都搬进了课本和教室里,希望我们的学生能在十几年的努力中,找到一种学习外语的捷径,以求得到一种运用英语的能力。但是,他们并没有十分成功,因为迄今为止还没有一种公认的、可行的、从黑头发人思维习惯和文化模式的角度研发出来的英语教学法,又因为在 960 万平方公里的土地上,仍有上千万的人为中考、高考、考研、晋级、出国留学、文化交流、商务洽谈和对外贸易等等知识性和商务性活动中所出现的英语障碍,而感到发愁、痛苦或流泪。但是,我们应该清醒地知道,掌握一门外语并不是一朝一夕的事情,因为学习一门外语并不仅仅是词汇与词汇之间的互换,也不是语法之间的对接。掌握一门外语还意味着两种思维和两种文化之间的融合与借鉴。此外,个人的生理与心理状况、家庭与学校的环境、社会的开放程度、政治上的稳定、经济的发展、文化的国际性和地域之间的差异等因素,也将决定着一个人或一个群体外语学习的成功与否。

　　《英语教育新理念》这部书是沈阳师范大学外国语学院青年教师和部分硕士研究生集体智慧的结晶和其指导教师的个体劳动成果。它从语言学、社会语言学、语用学、心理语言学、二语习得、情感因素、学习策略和文化人类学等角度探讨了英语教学及其方法。它不仅是一部供英语教育专业高年级学生研读的新教材,而且也是一盏引导我们向人类思维深处探索的小油灯。油灯很小,有时亮度也不够,但有了它我们就能看清眼前的道路,而我们现在要做的就是大胆地向前探索,因为今天的一小步,可能会成为未来的一次飞跃。

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SUN Ruohong（孙若红）

Ⅰ. Introduction

Much foreign language instruction is based on form-focused language presentation, followed by controlled practice. A task-based approach, in contrast, gives learners tasks to perform in the expectation that doing such tasks will drive forward language development. Given that language is learned for communication, and that meaning is primary, the attraction of a task-based approach to instruction is that it enables each of these to operate fairly directly. But of course the disadvantage is that engaging meaning and enabling communication might de-emphasize form. So the challenge of task-based instruction is to contrive sufficient focus on form to enable interlanguage development to proceed without comprising the naturalness of the communication that tasks can generate. Three issues are fundamental to such pedagogic aspirations:

- How tasks are selected to maximize the chances of a focus on form;
- How tasks are implemented, through pre-and post-task activities, as well as task adaptation
- How performance on tasks can best be conceptualized and evaluated.

In discussions of the selection and implementation of tasks, Skehan proposed a three-way distinction for the analysis of tasks (Skehan 1992), based on code complexity, cognitive complexity, and communicative pressure. Willis, on the other hand, presented a three-stage model for task-based instruction. The first stage is concerned with pre-task activities. The second stage consists of the task cycle itself. Within this stage there are the three sub-stages of (1) doing the task, (2) engaging in planning post-task, and (3) reporting. Finally, Willis suggests that after the two preceding phases of pre-task activity and the task cycle, there should be some degree of language focus where a variety of activities can be engaged in.

Being an English teacher who has been teaching listening comprehension for several years, I have kept a close watch on the research people have done in this area and I, myself, have done some work on that, too. In this chapter I'd like to share my understanding of task-based instruction with others and attempt to apply it to the teaching of listening comprehension.

The chapter will achieve the following goals:

- To identify real-time difficulties faced by ESL learners during listening.
- To find out the best way to run a listening class.
- To find out the ways of implementing task-based instruction in the teaching of listening comprehension.

II. A review of related literature

2.1 A rationale for task-based instruction

2.1.1 Concepts and definitions of tasks

Within the literature, tasks have been defined in a variety of ways. Long, for instance, suggests that a 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, taking a hotel reservation, writing a cheque, finding a street destination, and helping someone across a road. In other words, by task, it is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play, and in-between.
>
> Long 1985:89

The tasks Long sets out above are target tasks. They are the sorts of things that individuals typically do outside the classroom. The ultimate rationale for language instruction is to enable learners to do these things using language, and it is to be expected that classroom time will be taken up with the rehearsal of making reservations, writing letters, finding street destinations in a directory, and so on. However, learners will also do many things in class that are not rehearsals for performance outside of the classroom. Listening to a tape and repeating, doing a jigsaw reading task, solving a problem in small groups, these tasks are undertaken, not because learners will do them outside of the classroom, but because it is assumed that they facilitate the development of a learner's general language proficiency.

Richards, Platt and Weber have such a rationale when they suggest that a task

> is 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.
>
> Richards, Platt and Weber 1986:289

In this second definition, the authors take a pedagogical perspective. Tasks are defined in terms of what the learner will do in the classroom rather than in the outside world.

Nunan described pedagogical tasks as:

> 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.
>
> Nunan 1989:10

The final definition is from Breen:

> ... 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.
>
> Breen 1987: 23

Although a number of definitions of tasks exist, for present purposes a task is taken to be an activity in which: meaning is primary; there are some communication problems to solve; there is some sort of relationship to the real world; task completion has some priority; and the assessment of task performance is in terms of task outcome. (Candlin 1987, Nunan 1989, Long 1989). Of course, translating these criteria into reality is not always a straightforward matter. Most activities combine a number of priorities, and it is a fine judgment to claim that the communication of meaning is a primary goal for any particular task, or to assert that a task has a real-world relationship. Classrooms are classrooms, but even so, a task which requires personal information to be exchanged, or a problem to be solved, or a collective judgment to be made bears a relationship to things that happen outside the classroom in a way that separates these activities from doing, for example, a transformation exercise.

2.1.2 Components of task

2.1.2.1 Goals

Goals are the vague general intentions behind any given learning task. They provide a point of contact between the task and the broader curriculum. Teachers' answer to the question 'Why did you get learners to engage in Task X?' will generally take the form of some sort of

goal statement. Possible answers might be:

'I wanted to develop their confidence in speaking.'

'I wanted to develop their personal writing skills.'

'I wanted to encourage them to negotiate information between each other to develop their interactional skills.'

'I wanted to develop their study skills.'

Goals may relate to a range of general outcomes (communicative, affective or cognitive) or may directly describe teacher or learner behavior.

Another point worth noting is that goals are not always explicitly stated, although they can usually be inferred from an examination of a task. In addition there is rarely a simple one-to-one relationship between goals and tasks. In some cases a complex task involving a range of activities might be simultaneously moving learners towards several goals.

One classification of goals comes from a recent large-scale language curriculum project in Australia (the Australian Language Levels, or ALL, Project):

Goal Types		Examples
Communicative	-	establish and maintain interpersonal relations, and through this to exchange information, ideas, opinions, attitudes, and feelings, and to get things done
Socio-cultural	-	have some understanding of the everyday life patterns of their contemporary age group in the target language speech community. This will cover their life at home, at school and at leisure
Learning-how	-	to negotiate and plan their work over a certain time span, and learn how to set themselves realistic objectives and how to devise the means to attain them
Language and cultural awareness	-	to have some understanding of the systematic nature of language and the way it works

(Clark 1987:227-32)

The goals are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and that there may be tasks which cover more than one goal. For example, a small group discussion on a socio-cultural theme might relate to both communicative and socio-cultural goals.

2.1.2.2 Input

Input refers to the data that form the point of departure for the task. In fact, input for tasks can be derived from a wide range of sources.

speeches	interviews
conversations	oral descriptions
narratives	media extracts
public announcements	games and puzzles
cartoon strips	photos
letters	diaries
poems	songs
directions	telephone directories
invitations	menus
textbooks	labels

The inclusion of such materials as input raises again the question of authenticity: what mixture of authentic and specially written material is valid? What do we mean by authenticity? A rule-of-thumb definition for 'authentic' here is any material which has not been specially produced for the purposes of language teaching.

The argument for using authentic materials is derived from the notion that the most effective way to develop a particular skill is to rehearse that skill in class. Advocators of authentic materials point out that classroom texts and dialogues do not adequately prepare learners for coping with the language they hear and read in the real world outside the classroom. They argue that if we want learners to comprehend aural and written texts in the real world, then the learners need opportunities for engaging in these real-world texts in class.

2.1.2.3 Activities

Activities specify what learners will actually do with the input which forms the point of departure for the learning task. Prabhu, Clark and Pattison propose three different activity typologies:

Information-gap activity, which involves a transfer of given information from one person to another—or from one form to another, or from one place to another—generally calling for the decoding or encoding of information from or into language. One example is pair work in which each member has a part of the total information (for example an incomplete picture)

and attempts to convey it verbally to the other. Another example is completing a tabular representation with information available in a given piece of text. The activity often involves selection of relevant information as well, and learners may have to meet criteria of compl eteness and correctness in making the transfer.

Reasoning-gap activity, which involves deriving some new information from given information through processes of inference, deduction, practical reasoning, or a perception of relationships or patterns. One example is working out a teacher's timetable on the basis of given class timetables. Another is deciding what course of action is best (for example cheapest or quickest) for a given purpose and within given constraints. The activity necessarily involves comprehending and conveying information, as an information-gap activity, but the information to be conveyed is not identical with that initially comprehended. There is a piece of reasoning which connects the two.

Opinion-gap activity, which involves identifying and articulating a personal preference, feeling, or attitude in response to a given situation. One example is story completion; another is taking part in the discussion of a social issue. The activity may involve using factual information and formulating arguments to justify one's opinion, but there is no objective procedure for demonstrating outcomes as right or wrong, and no reason to expect the same outcome from different individuals or on different occasions.

Pattison proposes seven activity types. These are as follows:

Questions and answers

These activities are based on the notion of creating an information gap by letting learners make a personal and secret choice from a list of language items which all fit into a given frame (e. g. the location of a person or subject). The aim is for learners to discover their classmates' secret choices. This activity can be used to practise almost any structure, function or notion.

Dialogues and role-plays

These can be wholly scripted or wholly improvised, however, "If learners are given some choice of what to say, and if there is a clear aim to be achieved by what they say in their role-plays, they may participate more willingly and learn more thoroughly than when they are told to simply repeat a given dialogue in pairs".

Matching activities

Here, the task for the learner is to recognise matching items, or to complete pairs or sets. 'Bingo', 'Happy families' and 'Split dialogues' (where learners match given phrases) are examples of matching activities.

Communication strategies

These are activities designed to encourage learners to practise communication strategies such as paraphrasing, borrowing or inventing words, using gesture, asking for feedback, simplifying.

Pictures and picture stories

Many communication activities can be stimulated through the use of pictures (e.g. spotting the difference, memory test, sequencing pictures to tell a story).

Puzzles and problems

Once again, there are many different types of puzzles and problems. These require learners to 'make guesses, draw on their general knowledge and personal experience, use their imagination and test their powers of logical reasoning'.

Discussions and decisions

These require the learner to collect and share information to reach a decision (e.g. to decide which items from a list are essential to have on a desert island).

2.2 The implementation of task-based instruction

2.2.1 Willis and task-based instruction

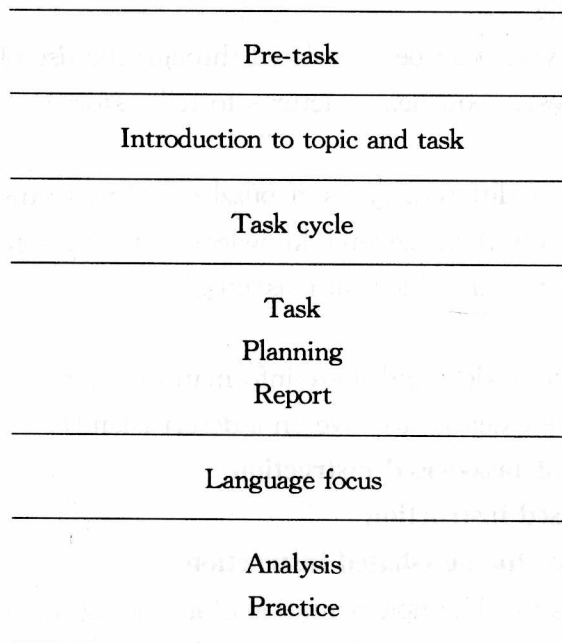#### 2.2.1.1 Willis' principles for task-based instruction

Willis offers five principles for the implementation of a task-based approach. In general terms the principles provide input, use, and reflection on the input and use. They are:

- There should be exposure to worthwhile and authentic language.
- There should be use of language.
- Tasks should motivate learners to engage in language use.
- There should be a focus on language at some points in a task cycle.
- The focus on language should be more and less prominent at different times.

The first of these points is proposing that input should be provided as an initiating force for language change. This, in turn, should be the basis for noticing and effective processing, which takes the input and directs attention to form. Clearly, the next two principles concern the ways in which language is actually used, with the motivation principle suggesting that tasks need to meet some criterion of engagement to be considered worthwhile. The remaining two principles are concerned with the ways in which form is brought into focus. Given that clear criteria argue for the naturalness of tasks, the requirements that a concern for form should be present and that the degree of prominence of a focus on form should vary at different stages and have cyclical qualities, suggests that pedagogic intervention needs to be artfully designed.

2.2.1.2 Willis' model for task-based instruction

Willis presents a model which is designed to meet these various needs.

Pre-task
Introduction to topic and task
Task cycle
Task Planning Report
Language focus
Analysis Practice

Willis model for task-based instruction (Willis 1996:52)

The first stage is concerned with pre-task activities, and these are of three sorts. First, we have activation of whatever schematic knowledge is likely to make the task more interesting and more authentic. This reflects the way in which tasks have to be about something, to provide a reason for real communication. Second, there needs to be exposure to actual language samples, so as to provide opportunities for a focus on form to be set in motion, and for noticing to occur. This stage may involve the use of texts, or it may give learners opportunities to see/hear native speakers do parallel forms of the task to come. Third, there is the need to focus attention, by using activities which operate upon the texts and data, and which lead learners to direct attention to the form of what is said, and to maximize the chances that attention is focused in useful ways.

The second stage that is proposed consists of the task cycle itself. Within this stage there are three sub-stages of doing the task, engaging in planning post-task, and reporting. The task itself provides opportunity for language use (and the development of fluency, accuracy, and complexity). In this planning stage the learners can draft and rehearse their public performance, thus learning from one another, while the teacher at this stage is in the permissible role of helper with the language, since the language which can then be supplied will be in response to perceived student need. In this role the teacher can help to ensure that there is a focus on form, and that learners' attention can be drawn to form-meaning relationships. At the end of the second general stage there is the reporting phase. This is the public performance which itself heightens attention to form and accuracy, and which also constitutes the validating activity for the previous planning. Interestingly, therefore, the

role of planning is post-task, but pre-reporting, in contrast to the proposals made below. After the two preceding phases of pre-task activity and the task cycle, there should be some degree of language focus where a variety of activities can be engaged in. But, importantly, the focus on language comes after a task has been done, with the intention that any language which is focused upon is relevant to learners and required for a communicative purpose, rather than introduced because a syllabus dictates that it should be covered at a particular point.

2.2.2 Skehan's principles for task-based instruction

Skehan proposes a set of five principles for task-based instruction. The five principles are:

- Choose a range of target structures.
- Choose tasks which meet the utility criterion.
- Select and sequence tasks to achieve balanced goal development.
- Maximize the chances of focus on form through attentional manipulation.
- Use cycles of accountability.

2.2.2.1 Choose a range of target structures

A sequence of structures will not be effective, since the power of internal processing factors is simply too strong, so that learners do not simply learn what teachers teach. The result is that it is futile to fix on a particular structure and expect it to be learned. On the other hand, there is a need for systematicity in language development, and the only way to resolve this conundrum satisfactorily is to have some method of keeping track of interlanguage development, but not in narrow specific terms. Identifying a range of target structures therefore combines realism with the need to be organized.

2.2.2.2 Choose tasks which meet the utility criterion

Learners are adept at evading the use of any particular structure, and to force them to conform is to render a task so unnatural as to make it of dubious value for acquisition. Consequently the teacher can only create appropriate conditions and hope that learners will avail themselves of the possibilities which operate. In this way, too, systematicity is being fostered, even though no guarantees exist as to which structures will actually be used in the ongoing nature of performance.

2.2.2.3 Sequence tasks to achieve balanced goal development

Giving learners tasks to do, even when these tasks are motivating and engage natural communicational abilities, is not enough: they also have to form part of a large pedagogic plan. A milder form of this danger is that tasks may be used which are unfocused as far as long-term development is concerned. A more significant danger is that tasks may be chosen which, because of the communicational demands, their level of difficulty, or manner of implementation, may lead learners to deploy communication strategies, rely on lexicalized

communication, or generally forget about any focus on form. The result will be that the focus on meaning will make it less likely that continuing interlanguage growth will occur.

To counter this, it is important to choose those tasks which:

- are of the appropriate level of difficulty;
- are focused in their aims between fluency, accuracy, and complexity;
- have some basis in task-based research.

2.2.2.4 Maximize the chances of a focus on form through intentional manipulation

Compelling the use of specific structures is not effective: what is needed is the provision of the most effective opportunity available for a focus on form in the context of meaningful language use. Specifically:

- At initial stages of task use, conditions need to be established to maximize the chance of noticing;
- In the task completion phase effective attentional conditions need to be engineered so that form is on focus. Specifically, this means that attentional demands which arise out of a task need to be of appropriate demand and level so as to ensure that simply transacting tasks do not consume all attentional resources;
- There must be opportunity for reflection and awareness so that whatever is accomplished during a task is not simply ephemeral, but can be processed more deeply and consolidated.

2.2.2.5 Use cycles of accountability

We have seen that the use of specific structures cannot be guaranteed, and that what can be hoped for is a generalized focus on form in the context that a range of structures will have been targeted, and that the use of these structures will have been supported through task choice and task implementation conditions. The key to making progress here would seem to draw learners into consciously engaging in cycles of evaluation. In other words the goal of instruction at any one time would not be to require the internalization of a particular structure. However, periodically, what has been learned can be reflected upon and a stock-taking can be attempted by the individual learner. This implies that a priority in task-based approaches to instruction is to mobilize the learner's own metacognitive resources to keep track of what is being learned, and what remains to be learned.

2.2.3 Implementing tasks: methodology

It is also important to consider how tasks, once chosen, are actually implemented. Three major stages can be distinguished in a methodological implementation as shown in the following table.

Methodological stages in implementing tasks

Stage	Goal	Typical techniques
Pre-emptive work	Restructuring - establish target language - reduce cognitive load	Consciousness-raising Planning
During	Mediate accuracy and fluency	Task Choice Pressure Manipulation
Post 1	Discourage excessive fluency Encourage accuracy and restructuring	Public Performance Analysis Testing
Post 2	Cycle of synthesis and analysis	Task Sequences Task Families

The general purpose of the pre-emptive, or pre-task activities is to increase the chance that some restructuring will occur in the underlying language system, and that either new elements will be incorporated, or that some re-arrangement of existing elements will take place. Within this general purpose, there are two more specific aims. First of all, pre-task activities can aim to teach, or mobilize, or make salient language which will be relevant to task performance. This can be attempted in a number of different ways. One, the most traditional, would be an approach which simply tries to set up the relevant language for a task, in which case one is essentially dealing with some form of pre-teaching, whether explicit or implicit. More radically, pre-task concern with language may not try to predict what language will be needed, but instead give learners a pre-task to do, and then equip them with the language that they need (Prabhu 1987, Willis and Willis 1998). On this view, the task itself would be the primary factor, and task-completion would be the aim that would dominate.

The second major type of pre-task activity would be to ease the processing load that learners will encounter when actually doing a task, releasing more attention for the actual language that is used (Van Patten 1994). The result will be that more complex language can be attempted (Crookes 1989) and greater accuracy can be achieved as well. A range of activities can be used to reduce cognitive complexity in this way. The cognitive familiarity of the task can be altered by pre-task activation sessions, where learners are induced to recall schematic knowledge that they have that will be relevant to the task they will do. The cognitive processing load during the task to come can also be influenced by a number of procedures. Learners could observe similar tasks being completed on video, or they could listen to or read transcripts of comparable tasks (Willis and Willis 1998). Learners could