

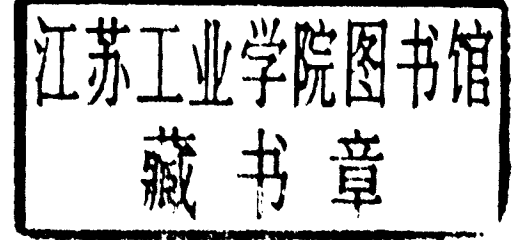
Edited by
MARTIN BYGATE
PETER SKEHAN
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Researching Pedagogic Tasks



APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND LANGUAGE STUDY

GENERAL EDITOR

CHRISTOPHER N. CANDLIN

*Chair Professor of Applied Linguistics
Department of English
Centre for English Language Education &
Communication Research
City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong*

For a complete list of books in this series see pages v-vi

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Second Language Learning,
Teaching and Testing

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List of contributors

Martin Bygate, University of Leeds
Chris Candlin, City University, Hong Kong
Micheline Chalhoub-Deville, University of Iowa
Rod Ellis, University of Auckland
Pauline Foster, St. Mary's University College/King's College, London
Sharon Lapkin, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
Tony Lynch, University of Edinburgh
Joan Maclean, University of Edinburgh
Virginia Samuda, Lancaster University
Peter Skehan, King's College, London
Merrill Swain, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
Gillian Wigglesworth, Macquarie University

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Introduction

Martin Bygate, Peter Skehan and Merrill Swain

TOWARDS A RESEARCHED PEDAGOGY

Pedagogy can be defined as 'intervention into thought and behaviour which is concerned to promote learning processes for intended outcomes'. By definition it therefore simultaneously involves decisions by teachers, action by learners and perceptible outcomes, both immediate and over time. Tasks are a central element of language pedagogy, and hence find themselves pivotally placed within this three-way relationship: their design can affect their use by teachers in the classroom, the actions of learners and the performance and learning outcomes. This book explores that relationship.

Pedagogy has been studied for centuries. However, much of that study has been based on principle, prescription and analogy. In contrast, a researched pedagogy (Leung, 1993) scrutinises pedagogic activity to assess its modes of implementation, its operation and its outcomes. This volume builds upon a growing number of previous publications to bring together a series of studies which investigate tasks in this way. Overall this is a very long-term project. A volume such as this can only sample a small range of tasks, in a limited number of contexts, with relatively few students, under a restricted range of conditions. There is a substantial range of pedagogic activities that remain to be researched, in a vast range of circumstances. In contrast, then, this collection makes a small contribution to the field. Yet this is the only way for progress to be made: pedagogy needs to be founded on systematic as well as enlightened observation. Systematic contributions will often be small, but no less valuable for that.

In fact, research into pedagogic tasks is one of a growing number of areas of empirical research which have emerged since the early 1980s. One of the basic functions of empirical research into language pedagogy is arguably feedback to the teaching profession, so that, as Brumfit argued 'we are able to attempt to assess the effectiveness of our educational system', and in order to receive 'information about alternatives to traditional methods, so that the alternatives can be introduced, in some systematic way, into the system' (Brumfit, 1980: 132). Following the discrediting of the large-scale experimental

1980; Howatt, 1984; Ellis, 1985; Johnson, 1996), the 1970s had seen a highly significant period of largely conceptual research in language teaching. This culminated in a series of landmark publications (such as Stevick, 1976; Wilkins, 1976; Widdowson, 1978, 1979; Munby, 1978; Brumfit and Johnson, 1979; Breen and Candlin, 1980; Canale and Swain, 1980).

Three particular themes were to permeate subsequent thought. First, communicative language teaching was explicitly a post-method approach to language teaching (see notably Brumfit and Johnson, 1979; and Brumfit, 1988), in which the principles underlying the use of different classroom procedures were of paramount importance, rather than a package of teaching materials. Second, the most fundamental element of the approach was its explicit emphasis on the role of authentic communication within classroom contexts. Third, the measure of effectiveness was no longer simply the ability to use language accurately (Widdowson's 'usage', 1978); it became the ability to use language accurately and appropriately in communicative contexts. These three themes had a strong influence on the nature and scope of subsequent empirical research, providing a justification for a narrowing of the focus from the earlier concern with the impact on learning of whole methods or courses, to the impact on learning of particular activities or interactions.

MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES ON TASKS: TEACHING, LEARNING AND TESTING

The three themes have had a major impact upon the nature of language teaching. One aspect of this impact has been the growing importance attached to the use of tasks within language pedagogy (Prabhu, 1987), a change which has led to a burgeoning of activity around task-based concepts. This, in turn, has resulted in the problem that the term 'task' is interpreted in a number of different but systematic ways by different groups of people. The purpose of this section is to explore some of these multiple interpretations with a view to disentangling the different viewpoints, and locating them in characteristic different contexts. Misunderstandings arising from the different perspectives may thus be more readily identified, and even avoided.

As a starting point, it is useful to focus on two groups who have each appropriated the term 'task' for their own purposes: these are communicative language teachers, and second language acquisition (SLA) researchers. Earlier approaches to communicative language teaching, developing ideas originating in discourse analysis, pragmatics and sociolinguistics, suggested that requiring learners to express meanings would be an effective underpinning principle to motivate foreign language learning (Brumfit and Johnson, 1979). A wide range of imaginative classroom techniques were consequently developed in the 1970s and 1980s to implement such an approach, and provided teachers with a much greater range of activities on which they might draw, either as supplementary materials functioning in an adjunct manner to a main coursebook, or as materials that could be integrated into main coursebooks.

Earlier interpretations of such activities represented them as methods of promoting interaction so that learners could express meanings in natural ways. Terms such as information gap activities (Harmer, 1991) or jigsaw activities (Geddes and Sturtridge, 1978) were used to capture how learners were required to use language for communicative purposes. As time went on, such activities were described increasingly as *tasks*, and attempts were made to develop methodologies and principles by which such tasks could be used effectively. In this way, the idea of task has, for many people, superseded the term *communicative language teaching* and portrays what happens when meaning-based language teaching is carried out systematically and as an alternative to instruction which focuses on forms (Long and Robinson, 1998). Significant publications of this sort are Prabhu (1987), who has articulated the feasibility of using a task-based approach to underpin an actual curriculum in India, and Willis (1996), who has put forward a set of principles by which tasks may be developed and used by teachers, building upon the production of a coursebook series (Willis and Willis, 1988). One might also draw attention to writers on process syllabuses (e.g. Breen, 1984) and project work (Fried-Booth, 1986), who have shown how tasks can be integrated into alternative frameworks for organising foreign language instruction.

The contrasting perspective on tasks has come from the work of SLA researchers. As the inadequacy of input as an explanatory construct to account for second language development became apparent (Swain, 1985), SLA researchers, too, began to focus on interaction and the output it triggered as causative influences on second language development. Theoretically, the viewpoint that interaction promoted negotiation for meaning, and that such negotiation provided ideal circumstances for SLA to proceed became, and remains, influential (Long, 1989; Long and Robinson, 1998). It was argued that such negotiation enables acquisitional processes to be catalysed, and that sustained development results. Negotiation itself is thought to ensure that there is a focus on form during the interaction, so that learners are provided with feedback to precisely those points of the interlanguage system which are malleable and ready to change. Swain (1985) extended this interpretation to theorise how output itself pushes learners to reflect upon language form so that interlanguage change is more likely.

Arising from such theoretically motivated concerns, researchers came to use the concept of task to account for the manner in which interaction was more or less likely to provoke negotiation for meaning, and published accounts of how different task features might be associated with such performance differences. Long (1989), for example, in an influential article, argued for the use of what he termed 'closed' tasks (e.g. agreeing on the objects needed in a survival scenario, i.e. *requiring* agreement on the outcome) rather than 'open' tasks (e.g. a discussion, where no required agreement is inevitable). Equally importantly, such theoretical accounts were matched by a strong commitment to empirical research. The claims about different task properties were seen as requiring empirical confirmation: simply making claims about the desirability of one task over another was regarded as vacuous – the claim had to be translated

into empirical operationalisations and confirmation. As a result, a range of studies was published, and a range of empirical techniques was developed.

The two approaches, although sharing the concept of task as central, use this concept to address different problems. The pedagogic approach presents the problem as one of understanding how the behaviour of the teacher can be made more effective and how learners can interact with tasks more effectively. Any solution to this problem is likely to involve teachers, course designers, and materials writers drawing on their teaching experience to understand task properties and produce effective examples of tasks. This is essentially a pragmatic response to characterising and working with tasks. The research approach presents the problem as one of how tasks may be used as a device to uncover the effective engagement of acquisitional processes. Tasks, in this account, are a window enabling fundamental issues to be studied more effectively. In this approach the role of theory is more prominent, as is an explicit concern with methods of inquiry. Data gathering and data analysis are themselves of interest, as the methods by which hypotheses and interpretations are substantiated.

It is also possible to view tasks in terms of different groups of users. This focuses more on the context of task use, rather than the manner in which tasks are investigated. In this respect, one can explore whether a concern with tasks relates to:

- the activity of the teacher;
- the process of learning and the role of the learner;
- the assessment of learning.

In the first of these cases, one would be looking at the decisions to be made about teaching tasks. The decisions might be for pedagogic action, or for data gathering or theory testing, but they would, ultimately, relate to pedagogic activities. In the second case, the emphasis would be on what happens from the learner's perspective. This would lead to an emphasis on what changes might take place in the learner's interlanguage; what processes might be operative to facilitate desirable change, and how the learner might respond to, or even choose, a task. Finally, assessment implicates tasks as testing devices and explores what can be said about the nature of learning and of performance as seen through task-based measurement formats.

The two dimensions at work here – manner of working with tasks (pragmatic vs research) and user groups and contexts (teachers, learners, assessment) – interact. A matrix (Figure 1.1) begins to make this clear. The pragmatic vs research dimension distinguishes between informal, practical decisions on the one hand, and the theoretical, systematic, evidence-based decisions on the other. Then, one can consider that the vertical dimension focuses on what the decisions in each case will be about, and who will make them. Hence the first row is concerned with tasks as the unit of decision-making for instruction (which can be approached either in terms of practical decisions, or research decisions). The middle row is concerned with tasks as the vehicle for the learner and learning, so that decisions relate to effectiveness for each

	Pragmatic/pedagogic	Research
Teachers and teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Task as a unit of work in a scheme of work • Interlinked activity sequences developing thematic unit • Methods of involving learners • Deliberate starting point for unknown direction or explorations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Task as researchable unit • Neat, cross-sectional approach • Relatively brief time interventions • Focus on the isolation of variables • Search for 'effects' through manipulation
Learners and learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learner orientation and autonomy • Task reinterpretability • Interactive development through collaboration of groups of learners • Authenticity of response 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extent to which learning processes are catalysed • Identification of theorised methods of operationalising constructs and measuring dependent variables • Research designs to probe: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – salient task variables – salient task conditions
Testing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formative evaluation • Provision of structured feedback on communication • Reactive, unstandardised and individual based 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summative evaluation • Task as format • Comparability and standardisation • Issues in performance assessment

Figure 1.1 Two dimensions underlying the study of tasks

of these cases. The last row is concerned with decision-making about learning and achievement, whether these are informally conducted, or whether the decision is linked to systematic research.

Each of the cells in Figure 1.1 is worth further discussion. In the *pragmatic/pedagogic* teachers and teaching cell of the matrix (i.e. top left) it can be seen that the focus for task concerns teacher decision-making about instructional issues. A first point here is that, given the different ways tasks are used, there is a wide range of activity in this cell. First of all, there is the issue of *what* a teacher considers a task to be. This may simply involve a task as an element in a scheme of work. In such a case, 'task', for the teacher, may be synonymous with a relatively self-contained activity (Nunan, 1989). But teachers may also use tasks in longer sequences of instruction, and so a teacher might consider the term 'task' to include a wide-ranging extended pedagogic plan or scheme of work. This might comprise a task cycle, as described by Willis (1996), which could extend over a few lessons, giving them unity, and possibly focus on particular areas of language. In such cases, it may be the teacher's intention, while the extended task is running, to provide principled support and feedback to induce learners to interpret tasks according to some pre-existing pedagogic plan. Alternatively, a task might be a theme which generates a whole series of lessons, in which case the teacher might well have in mind that longitudinal development on the part of learners should be fostered, and achieved, while only one (extended) task is being accomplished. In fact, 'task' viewed in this way bears a strong resemblance to

project work (see below). Indeed, to extend this teacher perspective on tasks, one might even think of a task as an activity initiated by a teacher in full knowledge that the development of the task will require him or her to relinquish control, as learners together, and in conjunction with the teacher, 'take possession' of the task. In this view, the task would be a teacher-oriented device to engage learners in a worthwhile set of linked activities.

But in all these cases, it should be said that the purpose of using tasks is to engineer satisfactory pedagogic activities and outcomes. For example, a (self-contained) task may be chosen to 'Machiavellise' the use of a particular structure – cf. Loschky and Bley-Vroman's (1993) *necessary* condition for a structure–task pairing. This may be done unavoidably, through task design (Fotos and Ellis, 1991) or it could be that the task prepares the ground for teacher activity to draw attention to form–meaning linkages (see Samuda, Chapter 6 in this volume). Alternatively, a task may be chosen simply to promote language use in a general performance area, such as fluency, or some aspect of communicative competence. It might even be that the teacher's purpose is to galvanise learners so that they spend more time focused on language precisely because a task is a more motivating activity than (say) a substitution exercise. In this case, the purpose of the task will be to catalyse general learning, and even the amount of time that is spent. In effect, this brings us close to the rationale for using tasks within project work: the initial task is merely a starting point. It is the structure it provides for teacher–student interaction that is the key to future development and exploitation, as learners take the original task in unforeseen directions.

If we turn next to the *research* cell of the teachers and teaching row, we can see a very different set of considerations. Here, *task* is conceptualised as a focused activity which is used because it will generate data of interest to the researcher. The interest may arise from theoretically motivated questions, such as the role of negotiation for meaning in promoting change in an interlanguage system, or the allocation of attention within an information-processing paradigm and the associated questions regarding performance dimensions. Equally, the interest could be derived from pedagogy, in which case many of the questions raised in the previous section could be reinterpreted to make them susceptible to research. Studies might pursue the comparative usefulness of different task types in achieving certain pedagogic goals, or the motivating qualities of tasks with different characteristics.

Very importantly, flowing from this starting point, some other features of tasks-as-research unit follow. For example, it is much less likely that the task will lead to extended work of the sort that is central to many pedagogic-pragmatic interpretations of task. Rather the researcher will probably want to gather data using a cross-sectional research design, with neatly organised groups of subjects, chosen to be as equivalent as possible. It is also likely that the conditions of task implementation will satisfy conditions of standardisation, and, as a result, some degree of ecological validity is likely to be lost. The search, in other words, is for experimental effects, and it is likely that if a quantitative approach is taken, the conventions of statistical evaluation

(significance levels, testing of hypotheses, falsifiability) will be applied. If, in contrast, a more qualitative approach is used, it is likely that transcript data from relatively small groups of learners over brief time intervals will be examined, and explanations and interpretations devised accordingly. In any case, there is likely to be some connection, in the evaluation phase, with underlying theory to account for the results that will have been obtained. The motivation to do research, in other words, will cause slightly different questions to be raised, as well as investigative conditions used, such that the capacity to use research results to make pedagogic recommendations will not be straightforward. The precision of doing research (and the pursuit of internal validity) may compromise the ease with which claims can be made about real-world settings (and the pursuit of external validity).

The pragmatic–research distinction also applies to the learners and learning row from Figure 1.1. Here, where the *pragmatic/pedagogic* interpretation applies, the emphasis is likely to be on the way in which the learner influences the choice, nature and interpretation of a task. Task choice is connected with issues in learner autonomy and reflects the way in which, in some pedagogic approaches, learners have a strong influence on which tasks are completed, and when (Breen, 1987). But even when a task is chosen (or imposed by the teacher), there is still the issue of what the learner makes of that task. Learners are perfectly capable of reinterpreting tasks, in such a way that the carefully identified pedagogic goals are rendered irrelevant as a learner invests a task with personal meaning, and takes it away from the teacher's expected path (Duff, 1993). It can even be the mark of a good task that learners are pushed in to this type of reaction. Developing this point, it may be the case that *groups* of learners reinterpret tasks in a collective manner, reacting to one another's contributions to take the task in unforeseen (but possibly more interesting) directions. As a result, the contributions that they make may have a more authentic quality, since the meanings that are being expressed may no longer be within the parameters set by the task designer, but may instead reflect the current interests and personalities of the learners. That such tasks may then be more stimulating for learners connects interestingly with situated interpretations of foreign language learning motivation (Dörnyei, 1996).

Turning next to the *research* perspective on learners and learning, we see yet another picture. Once again, we need to consider the questions which motivate the research, as well as the research methodologies that are used. Regarding research questions, the problems are interestingly different. Where learning itself is concerned, research will draw upon theories of second language development, expressed in terms of structural development or processes of change, to formulate questions for which task-generated data are relevant. Such questions might propose how particular interaction and task types or conditions for task implementation might be more supportive of interlanguage change. They may also explore how form–function relationships may be brought into prominence, or how interlanguage change may be nurtured and consolidated. In all these cases, the challenge will be to propose

research methodologies which can enable internal processes to be addressed through external, publicly analysable evidence.

Where learners themselves are concerned, research questions are more likely to focus on the acceptability of tasks to learners, and the potential that different task types have to catalyse extending and involving learner performances. There are also issues of learner motivation to be examined.

The previous *research* cell in our matrix, that for teachers and teaching, emphasised systematic inquiry, probably within a limited time-frame. Similarly, with learners and learning, it is likely that a research perspective will identify particular research problems as worthy of investigation and, as a result, introduce a focus into the research which causes a loss of ecological validity. In the case of teaching, relatively general manipulations of instructional activity may be operative. In contrast, with learners and learning, the emphasis is more likely to be on detailed analysis, with careful examinations of task performance, and scrutiny of such performance for specific evidence of learning processes. Operationalisation of measurement is more likely to be at a premium, and it may be that there is also a greater focus on the effects of different task characteristics and task conditions on the nature of the performance which results. The research designs which are used may, as a result, be further away from classroom realities, even to the extent of a reliance on laboratory-oriented research settings.

We turn now to the testing row. From a *pragmatic/pedagogic* perspective, the emphasis is on the use of information as a contribution to pedagogic decisions. This implies the use of tasks to provide formative information, during instruction, so that learners and teachers are better informed about the progress that has been made. It may also involve the use of tasks to generate feedback on communication, i.e. not simply to decide whether learning has taken place, but to provide diagnostic information to indicate to learners where their strengths and weaknesses lie and how they might be improved. One can imagine, in this respect, choosing and using tasks so that they provide better quality information to learners than would be available either by using alternative testing formats, or by using teacher judgements which may not benefit from the known qualities of using particular tasks to deliver useful information. One might add here that although tasks play a central role in much communicative teaching, the development of reliable task-based assessment techniques is woefully inadequate. This is one of the areas most in need of future attention.

We turn finally to the *research* perspective on using tasks for assessment. Here the focus is on how tasks can be used for summative evaluation, i.e. how tasks can be used to make reliable, valid and useful decisions about the level of achievement and proficiency of learners. The assumptions here are that:

- tasks are necessary for assessment since they create the required conditions for effective decisions about communicative *performance*;
- nonetheless tasks can introduce measurement bias if they are not based on known properties;

- examining how tasks can work effectively requires a research perspective which subjects candidate assessment tasks to some sort of scrutiny to establish that they are functioning in the way that is intended.

Activity in researching tasks from this perspective would lead to studies which treat 'task' as potential artefact, and explore the systematic influences that might follow from task choice and conditions of task use. The findings from such research will help to establish the way particular task choices or conditions might cloud the assessment decision that is made, i.e. cause the 'score' that is assigned to be partly or wholly a property of the task decisions that are made, rather than candidate ability.

DEFINING TASKS

Most attempts to define the concept of task have taken a context-free approach. Such attempts have often proved unsatisfactory since they inevitably have a limited range of application. To take a slightly different approach, we can now use the multiple perspectives on tasks from the previous section to reopen the way tasks can be defined. A sampling of definitions from the literature is a useful starting point. For example, and in chronological order:

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 . . . In other words, by 'task' is meant the hundred and one things people *do* in everyday life, at work, at play, and in between. (Long, 1985)

A piece of work or an activity, usually with a specified objective, undertaken as part of an educational course, at work, or used to elicit data for research. (Crookes, 1986)

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'. (Prabhu, 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. (Breen, 1987)

A piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form. (Nunan, 1989)

A task [is] any activity in which a person engages, given an appropriate setting, in order to achieve a specifiable class of objectives. (Carroll, 1993)

... we define a *language use task* as an activity that involves individuals in using language for the purpose of achieving a particular goal or objective in a particular situation. (Bachman and Palmer, 1996)

Tasks are always activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome. (Willis, 1996)

A task is an activity in which

- meaning is primary
- learners are not given other people's meanings to regurgitate
- there is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities
- task completion has some priority
- the assessment of the task is in terms of outcome. (Skehan, 1998)

This range of task definitions has been provided because the definitions are interestingly similar but also interestingly different. There is a sort of inclusive definition, such as that provided by Skehan (1998) which tries to embrace most (but not all) of the characteristics included in other definitions. But many of the definitions contain distinctive emphases. Some (e.g. Long) emphasise the real-world relationship for an activity to qualify as a task, while others (Carroll, Willis, and Bachman and Palmer) downplay this slightly, but still focus on the achievement of an *objective* where the emphasis is on meaning, not language. Most of the remaining definitions mention tasks in relation to classrooms. Some, such as Prabhu, Nunan and Crookes, also emphasise the outcome-linked nature of an activity, but clearly indicate that there is room for teacher intervention and possibly control. Others, principally Breen in this case, broaden what it is possible to include within a task to embrace most of what goes on within a language-learning classroom, with or without an emphasis on meaning.

In some ways, Breen's definition here is the broadest of them all, since it allows a very wide range of activities to be included, even those with some degree of an explicit focus on form. Slightly paradoxically, therefore, Breen (1987), in the context of describing process syllabuses, provides a radically different approach to characterising tasks. Most of the other approaches predicate some degree of control in task use, either through pedagogically motivated task choices, or through pedagogically motivated predictions as to the language which will be generated by the task activity. Breen (1987), in contrast (and see also Candlin, 1987), discusses the way in which pedagogic frameworks can give learners control over the original choice of task, and over the ways in which tasks are developed. In other words, far from expecting control over task use, Breen is proposing that it is a beneficial quality of language-learning activities if they can give learners room to reinterpret what is required, and take the activity in unforeseen, but satisfying, directions. To put this another way, Breen is arguing that a workplan which the teacher thinks will be implemented rigidly and exactly as planned is a delusion: real classrooms, he argues, never follow pre-ordained paths, and are the better for it.

This insight of Breen's also leads into another important issue in characterising task: the time-frame within which the task operates. Most of the

definitions that we have surveyed, even those which are focused on pedagogy, implicitly focus on establishing a threshold of 'taskiness', so that one can decide whether a particular activity qualifies for the description 'task'. But if there is a pedagogic dimension to the way a task is used, there is also a concern with the sequence of activity under the broad rubric of 'task'. In other words, different developmental courses can be charted for a given task which might have radically different effects upon what happens to the 'starting task'. This, coupled with Breen's claim that tasks are invariably reinterpreted, raises something of a contrast between the circumscribed, focused task, where control and prediction of language are major issues, and the more open task, which is susceptible to development over time, as well as change to suit learner need.

The most effective response to this situation is perhaps to state the obvious: definitions of task will need to be different for the different purposes to which tasks are used. Indeed, the range of definitions we have already seen may need to be extended to take account of the different emphases which reflect the different uses of task. We can start with a fairly basic, all-purpose definition, and then see how this needs to be supplemented:

A task is an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective.

If we were to try to adapt this definition to make it more directly relevant to the pragmatic/pedagogic teaching cell from, it might need to be modified to read:

A task is an activity, susceptible to brief or extended pedagogic intervention, which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective.

If instead, while staying with the pragmatic/pedagogic column of Figure 1.1, one moved to adapt the definition for learners and learning, it might need to be changed to read:

A task is 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.

Finally, in the pragmatic/pedagogic column, we can consider a definition of task that might be appropriate for testing and assessment purposes:

A task is an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective, and which is chosen so that it is most likely to provide information for learners which will help them evaluate their own learning.

We can now turn to the second, research-oriented column. Two points are worth making at the outset. First, in contrast to the other column, not all tasks are connected to pedagogy. It may be the case that tasks are used for research in order to gain a better understanding of pedagogy. There may be occasions when tasks are a suitable vehicle for researchers to investigate other issues of interest, such as the nature of performance, or the competence-performance relationship. On occasions, studies focusing on such issues may

have an indirect relationship to pedagogy, but there may be occasions when there is little connection whatsoever. Second, in contrast to most of the pedagogic perspectives, there is likely to be a much greater concern to achieve control over what happens with tasks, since it is in the nature of research (or at least, quantitative research), to achieve some degree of precision and control of variables in establishing causality in the effects which may be found.

With these factors in mind, we can try to adapt the basic definition for the research column applied to the teachers and teaching row:

A task is a focused, well-defined activity, relating to pedagogic decision making, which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective, and which elicits data which may be the basis for research.

In contrast, when we move to the learners and learning row, it would be more appropriate to suggest that:

A task is a focused, well-defined activity, relating to learner choice or to learning processes, which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective, and which elicits data which may be the basis for research.

Finally, we come to the research perspective on testing and assessment. For this, the definition might be adapted as follows:

A task is a contextualised, standardised activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, and with a connection to the real world, to attain an objective, and which will elicit data which can be used for purposes of measurement.

This definition brings out that the purpose of choosing a task for testing is to identify a data elicitation procedure of known qualities, and which meets the criterion of communicativeness that is attractive in all task-based work. The overriding purpose is to identify a data elicitation method which is as transparent and as fair as possible.

Clearly, *task* will mean slightly different things to different groups. What the different definitions (and the characterisations from the previous section) emphasise is that there is scope for misunderstanding between the different groups. Researchers may frequently prefer tasks which are rather static in nature, precisely because this provides them with a dependable unit on which they can hang their research. They may research such a task through quantitative or qualitative methods, but they will want the focus and circumscribed nature that the research-oriented definitions provide. In contrast, tasks approached from a teaching perspective may well be dynamic and extended – qualities that may be most desired by task users. The lack of standardisation that results may cause difficulty for researchers, but the potential that such tasks have for development may be exactly what makes them attractive. It may be necessary, therefore, to have greater clarity about the definition of task that applies in different circumstances. This will allow greater harmonious coexistence between the different groups, and enable each of them to be more appreciative of the others, as well as avoid applying inappropriate standards for task evaluation.

THE PEDAGOGIC VALIDITY OF THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

Given this volume's focus on research-based studies, there are a number of general issues that bear on the place and conduct of task-based research. Most broadly, in this respect, Freedman (1971) argued for large numbers of small-scale studies of particular pedagogic approaches. Brumfit, in contrast, suggested the running of more loosely controlled experiments, 'but which are closely related to actual teaching situations, using typical teachers, in typical conditions, and on a very large scale' (Brumfit, 1980: 135). These views were early signals of a re-centring of language teaching research in which a central factor is the pedagogic validity of the research context.

The question of the pedagogic validity of task research has been a consistent matter of contention. The questions of the early 1970s remain (as reflected in the recent papers by Crookes, 1997, and Ellis, 1997):

- What is the pedagogic validity of research that has been carried out in non-classroom settings?
- What is the validity or reliability of research that has been carried out in such settings?
- To what extent can single-shot studies, whether small scale or large scale, carry conviction if they remain without replication in other contexts or by other researchers?

Hence, it is perhaps understandable that while most of the studies in this volume are classroom-based, questions can still be asked about the typicality of these classroom contexts. More generally, the view proposed here argues for the acceptance of the importance both of *case studies*, which enable micro-genetic analyses of transcript data, and of *group studies*, which tend to depend for their arguments on generalisations based on relatively large sets of pooled data.

The research into task-as-pedagogic unit can be generalised into three main areas of concern:

- the impact of task design and task conditions on performance;
- the impact of task selection and use on learning;
- the relationship of tasks to underlying processing factors.

Regarding the first of these, the issue of task design and performance has as priority the identification and separating out of underlying features of tasks which are capable of impacting on the content and complexity of learners' language and of their language processing (Bygate, 1999). This issue can be summarised as emphasising the construct validity of tasks and their conditions of use, and is clearly important for test design, materials design, materials implementation and syllabus development.

The second concern – the dynamic issue of the impact of task selection and use on language learning – focuses rather on the ways in which performance can effect changes in competence. This is being theorised in a number of ways – for instance, in terms of a task's capacity to focus learners' attention

on, and facilitate their retention of, specific features of language (e.g. Swain, 1985, 1995; and Ellis in this volume); or in terms of the ways tasks and task conditions can lead learners to adjust their focus of attention between accuracy, fluency and complexity (Skehan, 1998). Both concerns engage our conceptualisation of the underlying construct of task performance. In the absence of a fully developed theory of the complexities of task performance (which would entail a multi-level account, capable of showing the ways in which learners' capacities develop simultaneously on a range of levels), empirical research must simplify the construct. Hence the different aspects of language and language processing focused on by the various contributors to this volume, and the partial views they reflect.

The third area of concern, that of the relationship between tasks and underlying processing factors, includes issues such as:

- The impact of the conceptual content of tasks.
- Parameters of task design in terms of their likely impact on aspects of language processing.
- The nature of the interactive dimension of different tasks.
- The nature of comprehension processing.
- The ways in which interaction on tasks can focus learners' attention on form–meaning relations during lessons.

The connection between processing and learning is also pursued in a number of different ways, such as studies which consider the manner in which comprehension processing relates to the acquisition of new language, and studies which explore how task performance itself might develop over time.

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE VOLUME

We can now draw upon this discussion to locate the contributions to the book. All the contributions take a research perspective to tasks, but they do so in different areas, with sets of papers emphasising teaching, learning and assessment respectively. In Part I, chapters by Bygate, Ellis and Foster address issues connected with task pedagogy from teaching perspectives. In each case, the focus is on understanding the predictable qualities that different sorts of tasks may have, and the methodological approach is to study manipulations in task qualities and relate these to the sort of performance that results.

Bygate, in Chapter 2, explores how second language speakers can learn to use what they know in more effective ways. He draws upon Levelt's theory of speech performance, and its proposed components of a conceptualiser and a formulator to explore how meaning and form can be contrived to be in productive balance. He reports on a study in which task repetition and task type are the experimental variables, and in which he shows how the opportunity to repeat a task enables learners to access more demanding language more readily.

Ellis (Chapter 3), like Skehan in Chapter 8, reviews a *series* of studies, rather than reporting on just one. In this way, he is able to propose more wide-ranging generalisations for the theme of the research: the use of non-reciprocal tasks in language learning. After proposing interesting justification for researching non-reciprocal tasks, he draws upon theories of the role of input and output in second language learning to underpin a series of studies exploring the respective contributions and value of unmodified, premodified and interactionally modified input. He also explores how output itself has an important part to play in second language development.

In Chapter 4, Foster reports on a study of the effects of planning on the lexicalised language used in a decision-making task. After reviewing the literature on the use of formulaic language, she explores how learners and native speakers use prefabricated chunks differently under planned and unplanned conditions. She shows that the two groups respond to the opportunity to plan in different ways, which one group uses lexicalised chunks more under planned conditions, and the other less. The study also makes important contributions to the identification of chunk-based language in spoken performance.

Part II of the book focuses on the nature of learners and learning. Two of the chapters have a clear focus on the way teachers may try – either through the activities that are used or through the nature of teacher–student dialogue while a task is being done – to bring form and function into clear and interesting relationship. Swain and Lapkin (Chapter 5) explore the consequences for learners of using particular types of pedagogic tasks. They give learners dictogloss and jigsaw tasks to complete, and then explore the potential these tasks have for focusing learners' attention on gaps in their interlanguage, and for stimulating collaborative dialogue to repair these gaps. The approach is Vygotskian in nature, in that it explores how potentially productive encounters are exploited by learners *when they work together* in an effective manner. The study uses both quantitative and qualitative data analyses to compare the usefulness of the two types of task in question.

Samuda (Chapter 6) explores what teachers can do to help learners notice relevant form–meaning mappings while carrying out tasks in class. She is concerned with ways that teachers can make form–meaning connections more salient without compromising the communicative nature of the encounter. She distinguishes between knowledge-activating and knowledge-constructing tasks, and shows how teacher behaviour can produce input-enhancement for learners, in which teachers, in the context of knowledge-activating tasks, can build upon what learners already know by 'leading from behind'. The emphasis in this study is on how a careful task choice can lead students, under teacher-supported conditions, to 'mine' tasks to achieve such initial noticing, but then also to reflect upon the form–meaning mappings concerned, as well as consolidate use of the forms in question. Samuda relates this work to current activity with recasts and shows how what she terms interweaves and precasts can impact upon language learning.

Lynch and Maclean (Chapter 7) take a slightly different approach to researching tasks within the context of teaching. Like Bygate in Chapter 2,

they also research the effects of task repetition, but are more concerned with exploring how learners, within an intact class, can be provided with a task susceptible to repetition which is an entirely natural part of the teaching plan. They report a case study from a medical English ESP programme. Participants (oncologists and medical specialists), while preparing to make conference presentations, were required to interact with one another, either as 'authors' of posters, or as questioners of the authors of posters. Pairs of students constructed posters based on a short article (with a different research article for each pair). One of each pair then 'visited' the other posters in the class while the other member stayed behind and 'received' visitors. (Then roles were reversed.) In this way, repetition was naturally built into an activity for the poster 'host', as a series of visitors arrived. Lynch and Maclean were able to study the language development and the self-perceptions of language improvement over a cycle of several 'hostings'.

The final set of chapters focus on tasks as a vehicle for assessment. In Chapter 8, Skehan, like Ellis, reports on a metastudy, but this time in the area of testing. He draws upon a series of research studies into tasks to search for generalisations on the effects of different task characteristics on performance. Drawing on a model of oral language assessment, he shows how tasks are not neutral devices to elicit rateable performance, but rather they introduce artefactual influences such that certain sorts of task predispose performance in certain directions. Task performance is measured in this study by detailed indices based on transcripts. Even so, the connection to actual testing situations is clear. Ratings assigned in such situations might not reflect candidate ability as much as the consequences of the particular task type that was used.

Wigglesworth (Chapter 9) also reports on a study of the effects of task characteristics on performance. Although this is only one study, conducted in the context of migrant education in Australia, it is a complex study, in which a number of different task characteristics – e.g. presence or absence of pre-task planning, and task structure – are investigated. Wigglesworth uses a number of methods of assessing performance. Unlike Skehan, she does not use detailed, transcript-based measures, but instead relies on three sources of evidence: direct ratings of performance, logit scores based on an item response analysis (which takes into account relative difficulty of tasks), and candidate reactions to the different tasks used. Like Skehan in Chapter 8, the conclusion is that tasks introduce systematic variance into the testing enterprise: their characteristics inevitably introduce systematic effects upon performance.

In Chapter 10, Chalhoub-Deville discusses fundamental concepts in task-based assessment, and also reports on an empirical study. She explores the relevance for testing of the concepts of learner-centredness, contextualisation, and authenticity, and shows how these three concepts can profitably be applied to some common oral language assessment frameworks. Drawing on this discussion, she then adopts the less frequently used statistical technique (in task and testing research) of multidimensional scaling to examine the

extent to which three popular formats in oral assessment might contain format effects which intrude into the neutrality of the measurement of oral language that results. In a similar way to Skehan and Wigglesworth, she is able to show that the choice of assessment procedure, itself conceptualised in terms of task, introduces unwanted variance into measurement.

The three chapters in the testing section show that the two areas of language testing and task-based instruction, although rarely brought together, have much to offer one another. Testing contributes interesting statistical techniques, often designed to identify difficulty. Task researchers similarly are interested in the concept of difficulty, but often approach it in a more conceptual manner. As seen from the chapters in this volume, the combination of task-derived theorising, and testing-derived measurement rigour can make major future contributions.

CONCLUSION: PEDAGOGY AND RESEARCH

There are a number of potential problems in the relationship between pedagogy and research which have been the focus of concern in the literature. The main problems can be seen as different facets of the overriding concern of relevance. These include issues such as:

- The focus of the research – whether it meets the priorities of teachers.
- The way the research is problematised or conceptualised – that is, whether it is conceptualised and analysed in ways which make sense to teachers.
- The applicability of the research – that is, whether teachers can use it.

The purpose of publishing such a volume is to try to put the work to the test of relevance, and to find ways in which future work could get closer to meeting each of the three criteria and, as a result, show how research can relate to pedagogy.

The focus of research into tasks is inevitably going to be partial, and reflect the interests of each investigator. But then, the priorities of different teachers will not coincide either, as different classroom realities are responded to. We can only propose that the themes of the different chapters do relate to priorities that are operative for a great many teachers. Frequent questions which are posed in teachers' seminars concern how tasks may be chosen and used, as well as what language different task choices are likely to predispose. The range of studies here provide some clues for teachers who are seeking to make task selection and task implementation decisions based on principle, with chapters on issues such as task repetition, planning, task choice, and how to bring form into focus.

The way that tasks are problematised can also be a barrier for teachers-as-consumers of research, since, as the section on task definition earlier in this chapter makes clear, it is all too easy for teachers to feel somewhat disenfranchised because task researchers have pursued internal research validity at some expense to the directness of connections with real classrooms. Yet the

studies in the present collection mostly take, as task-to-be-researched, a range of activities which would not look out-of-place in any communicative classroom. Indeed, most tasks were chosen for their very ordinariness, providing them with strong claims for classroom relevance. In addition, there are contributions, especially in Section Two, which foreground the role of the teacher, e.g. the chapter by Samuda. These show what scope there is for teacher decisions while a task is running, and how the role of the teacher in task-based learning is only now being clarified.

In assembling this collection, the editors are aware that the contributions vary in the extent to which they meet the criterion of relevance. We are confident that all the chapters meet the criterion of applicability. Whether in the areas of teaching, testing, or learning, the theme of each chapter has, we believe, practical relevance to the classroom, whichever the theme: negotiating from meaning to form; the carousel; task repetition; the role of planning time; formulaic language; focus on form during comprehension and negotiation tasks; and task complexity. What is less certain is that teachers will have already spontaneously chosen these issues as relevant issues, or whether they will wish to think about them in the ways outlined in these pages. At the least, this volume provides a series of argued insights into the impact of tasks on language learning, and so contributes to development in the understanding of theory and practice.

Collections of research articles can often appear to reflect a troubling lack of consensus between the authors. Whichever designs are used, they seem to imply disagreement with other types of design: this might suggest a war of conflicting approaches in which alliances – between authors represented within the same volume, or between individual authors within the volume and other groups of researchers – vie to gain control over the terrain. This volume has not been assembled on this assumption. Many of those publishing group comparative studies in this volume have also used case studies on other occasions, and will do so again. The volume, therefore, represents a range of understandings of (a) the nature of task-based language, language processing, and language learning, (b) the tasks that can be usefully researched and (c) the ways in which those tasks can be studied. In so doing, it continues a long-standing tradition in the human sciences in general, and in education in particular, of attempting to discover how human events relate to learning – however chaotic they may appear to be (Dewey, 1910; Bruner, 1966).

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Part I

TASKS AND LANGUAGE PROCESSING

The three chapters in this part all report on task-based studies which are experimental in nature, in that each uses a careful research design and emphasises a quantitative methodology (although each also draws upon qualitative data). They also have in common that they each investigate the operation of one or more central aspects of language processing in relation to second language acquisition. In this respect, the three papers make a much needed contribution to our understanding of how the use of tasks can be exploited to engage different psycholinguistic processing mechanisms to promote development. Each of the studies grounds its concerns in a guiding literature and examines task performance in light of that literature.

For Bygate, the emphasis is on models of speech performance, particularly that of Levelt. The chapter explores the possibility that teachers' choice of task type could be deliberately targeted to provide learners with systematic practice, in particular by aiming to develop learners' capacities to deal with particular task types. This provides the backcloth for an investigation of the effects of repetition on task performance. In contrast, Ellis considers the impact on noticing and recall of different input channels and of different qualities of input. He draws upon the extensive literatures on input, modification of input, and output effects to explore how comprehension, acquisition, and performance are affected by a range of experimental pedagogic manipulations. He offers extensive detailed justification for the use of non-reciprocal tasks in terms of this literature, showing that input issues are susceptible to investigation with such tasks, but that interactive tasks may well have stronger effects than one-way tasks. In Chapter 3, Foster shares Bygate's concern with the processing of language output in task contexts. She reports on a study which connects with the literatures on planning and on lexicalised language, showing how, when native and non-native speakers carry out a production task, they rely upon lexicalised language in different ways under different conditions. As in the case of the other two chapters in this part, this study is unusual within the literature on task-based learning in that it uses output data to infer patterns in the processing of spoken language – in this case to suggest differences in the speech processing of native and non-native speakers.