Task-Based Language Teaching

A comprehensively revised edition of *Designing Tasks for the Communicative Classroom*

DAVID NUNAN

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Designing Tasks was dedicated to my young daughters Jenny and Rebecca. This work is dedicated to my grown-up daughters, Jenny and Rebecca.

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Thanks to Mickey Bonin, who first encouraged me to take on this project, and to Alison Sharpe and Jane Walsh for their editorial guidance. Particular thanks to the anonymous reviewers of an earlier draft of this book who provided many insightful criticisms and suggestions. Needless to say, remaining shortcomings are mine alone.

Introduction

The purpose of the book

This book began life as the second edition to *Designing Tasks for the Communicative Classroom*. The original volume was written in the mid-1980s, and was published in 1989. At that time, task-based language teaching was beginning to arouse attention. Although it was more than a distant prospect, it was far from a mainstream concept. As with the original book, this volume is aimed at practising teachers in ELT and applied linguists (teacher trainers, language planners, and materials writers), as well as teachers in preparation.

When I began working on this volume, I quickly realized how far the field had come. It was brought home to me that I was embarking on the creation not of a second edition but of a completely new book, and that in consequence it deserved a new title.

Recently, I completed a study into the impact on policies and practices of the emergence of English as a global language (Nunan 2002, 2003). Data were collected from a range of countries in the Asia-Pacific region including Japan, Vietnam, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea and Malaysia. In interviews with teachers, teacher educators and ministry officials, and from a study of curriculum guidelines and syllabuses, 'task-based language teaching' emerged as a central concept. At the same time, I was involved in preparing a publication proposal for China on behalf of a commercial publisher. I was given a reasonable degree of latitude in putting the proposal together, but was informed that in order to be considered by the Ministry of Education it had to contain 'task-based language teaching' as its ruling rubric.

These two anecdotes illustrate the extent to which the concept has moved to the centre ground, rhetorically at least. However, it still has a long way to go to become rooted in classroom practice. In workshops and seminars in different parts of the world, I am constantly asked by teachers, 'What is task-based language teaching, and how do I make it work?' This book is an attempt to answer both parts of that question. As with *Designing Tasks*, the purpose of the book is to provide teachers with a practical introduction to task-based language teaching along with the theoretical and empirical bases that support it.

In addition to a complete revamping and updating of principles and ideas from *Designing Tasks*, I felt four areas deserved their own chapter-length treatment. These were:

- A model for task-based language teaching (TBLT) that articulated the relationship between tasks and other curricular elements.
- The empirical basis for TBLT.
- The place of a focus on form in TBLT.
- Assessing TBLT.

In order to accommodate these new chapters, chapters in the original book had to be dropped, condensed or otherwise rearranged. The structure of the present book is described below.

The structure of the book

Chapter 1 defines the notion of 'task' and illustrates the ways in which it will be used. The relationship between task-based language teaching and communicative language teaching is discussed and set within a broader curriculum framework. Ideological assumptions about the nature of language pedagogy inherent in TBLT are also discussed. In the final part of the chapter I look at the impact of the concept of TBLT on both the learner and on institutional policy and practice.

The first section of Chapter 2 introduces a framework for TBLT. The framework defines and exemplifies the key elements in the model that underlies the rest of the book. The sections that follow outline a procedure for creating an integrated syllabus around the concept of the pedagogic task and discuss issues of lesson planning and materials design. The final section summarises the key principles underpinning TBLT.

Chapter 3 looks at the key elements that constitute a task, namely, task goals, input and procedures. The chapter also deals with teacher and learner roles as well as the settings for TBLT.

One notable aspect of TBLT has been an explosion in the amount of research stimulated by the subject. The purpose of Chapter 4 is to provide a summary of this research. One area of particular interest is that of task difficulty. The research covered here provides a basis for the subsequent discussion of task grading.

The place of a focus on form in TBLT remains controversial. In Chapter 5, I examine the nature of the controversy, and spell out where I see a focus on form fitting in to a task-based instructional cycle.

Chapter 6 looks at issues and difficulties associated with the grading of tasks as well as at options for sequencing and integrating tasks into lessons or units of work. This chapter contains updated material from

Chapters 5 and 6 of the original volume, as well as a considerable amount of new content.

Task-based language teaching presents challenges in all areas of the curriculum. This is particularly true for assessment, which is coming under increasing scrutiny as it is realized that TBLT cannot be assessed according to traditional methods. In Chapter 7, I look at key concepts, issues and controversies in assessment and relate these to TBLT.

Chapter 8 is devoted to tasks and teacher development. The purpose of this chapter is to look at task construction and evaluation from the perspective of the teacher, and to provide suggestions for introducing tasks in teacher development workshops.

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Contents

Acknowledgements xi
Introduction xiii

Chapter 1 What is task-based language teaching?
Introduction and overview 1
Defining 'task' 1
Broader curricular consideration 4
Communicative language teaching 6
Alternative approaches to syllabus design 10
Experiential learning 12
Policy and practice 13
The role of the learner 14
Conclusion 16
References 16

Chapter 2 A framework for task-based language teaching
Introduction and overview 19
A framework for task-based language teaching 19
Syllabus design considerations 25
Developing units of work 31
Seven principles for task-based language teaching 35
Conclusion 38
References 38

Chapter 3 Task components
Introduction and overview 40
Goals 41
Input 47
Procedures 52
Task types 56
Teacher and learner roles 64
Settings 70
Conclusion 73
References 73

此为试读,需要完整PDF请访问: www.ertongbook.com

Chapter 4 An empirical basis for task-based language teaching
Introduction and overview 76
Early psycholinguistic models 76
Interaction, output and the negotiation of meaning 79
Task difficulty 85
Conclusion 90
References 91

Chapter 5 Focus on form in task-based language teaching
Introduction and overview 93
Theoretical and empirical issues 93
Focused versus unfocused tasks 94
Consciousness-raising tasks 98
Procedural language 100
The place of a focus on form in an instructional sequence 101
Focus on form in the communicative classroom 103
Conclusion 111
References 112

Chapter 6 Grading, sequencing and integrating tasks
Introduction and overview 113
Grading input 114
Learner factors 118
Procedural factors 122
Task continuity 125
Within-task sequencing: the information gap 128
Topic-based / theme-based instruction 131
Content-based instruction 131
Project-based instruction 133
Conclusion 135
References 136

Chapter 7 Assessing task-based language teaching
Introduction and overview 138
Key concepts in assessment 138
The purposes of assessment 147
Self-assessment 149
Techniques for collecting assessment data 153
Criteria for assessing learner performance 161
Conclusion 164
References 164

Chapter 8 Tasks and teacher development
Introduction and overview 166
The self-directed teacher 166
An in-service workshop 168
Evaluating tasks 173
Creating tasks 175
Conclusion 177
Postscript 177
References 179

Appendix A Approaches and methods – an overview 181

Appendix B A unit of work based on the six-step procedure presented in Chapter 2 187

Appendix C A unit of work based on the task/exercise typology in Chapter 5 195

Appendix D Graded activities for the four macroskills 202

Appendix E Common reference levels: self-assessment grid 210

Glossary 212

Index 218

1 What is task-based language teaching?

Introduction and overview

The concept of 'task' has become an important element in syllabus design, classroom teaching and learner assessment. It underpins several significant research agendas, and it has influenced educational policy-making in both ESL and EFL settings.

Pedagogically, task-based language teaching has strengthened the following principles and practices:

- A needs-based approach to content selection.
- An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language.
- The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation.
- The provision of opportunities for learners to focus not only on language but also on the learning process itself.
- An enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning.
- The linking of classroom language learning with language use outside the classroom.

In this chapter, I will map out the terrain for the rest of the book. I will firstly define 'task' and illustrate the ways in which it will be used. I will then relate it to communicative language teaching and set it within a broader curriculum framework, as well as spelling out the assumptions about pedagogy drawn on by the concept. In the final part of the chapter I will look at the impact of the concept on the learner, on one hand, and on institutional policy and practice on the other.

Defining 'task'

Before doing anything else, I need to define the central concept behind this book. In doing so, I will draw a basic distinction between what I will call real-world or target tasks, and pedagogical tasks: target tasks, as the name implies, refer to uses of language in the world beyond the classroom; pedagogical tasks are those that occur in the classroom.

Long (1985: 89) frames his approach to task-based language teaching in terms of target tasks, arguing that a target 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, making a hotel reservation, writing a cheque, finding a street destination and helping someone across a road. In other words, by 'task' is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play and in between.

The first thing to notice about this definition is that it is non-technical and non-linguistic. It describes the sorts of things that the person in the street would say if asked what they were doing. (In the same way as learners, if asked why they are attending a Spanish course, are more likely to say, 'So I can make hotel reservations and buy food when I'm in Mexico,' than 'So I can master the subjunctive.') Related to this is the notion that, in contrast with most classroom language exercises, tasks have a non-linguistic outcome. Non-linguistic outcomes from Long's list above might include a painted fence, possession – however temporary – of a book, a driver's licence, a room in a hotel, etc. Another thing to notice is that some of the examples provided may not involve language use at all (it is possible to paint a fence without talking). Finally, individual tasks may be part of a larger sequence of tasks; for example the task of weighing a patient may be a sub-component of the task 'giving a medical examination'.

When they are transformed from the real world to the classroom, tasks become pedagogical in nature. Here is a definition of a pedagogical task:

> . . . 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 . . . since it provides a purpose for a classroom activity which goes beyond the practice of language for its own sake.
>
> (Richards, *et al.* 1986: 289)

In this definition, we can see that the authors take a pedagogical perspective. Tasks are defined in terms of what the learners will do in class rather

than in the world outside the classroom. They also emphasize the importance of having a non-linguistic outcome.

Breen (1987: 23) offers another definition of a pedagogical task:

> . . . 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 purposes 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.

This definition is very broad, implying as it does that just about anything the learner does in the classroom qualifies as a task. It could, in fact, be used to justify any procedure at all as 'task-based' and, as such, is not particularly helpful. More circumscribed is the following from Willis (1996), cited in Willis and Willis (2001): a classroom undertaking '. . . where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome'. Here the notion of meaning is subsumed in 'outcome'. Language in a communicative task is seen as bringing about an outcome through the exchange of meanings. (p. 173).

Skehan (1998), drawing on a number of other writers, puts forward five key characteristics of a task:

- meaning is primary
- learners are not given other people's meaning 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.

(See also Bygate, Skehan and Swain 2001, who argue that the way we define a task will depend to a certain extent on the purposes to which the task is used.)

Finally, Ellis (2003: 16) defines a pedagogical task in the following way:

> A task is a workplan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed. To this end, it requires them to give primary attention to meaning and to make use of their own linguistic resources, although the design of the task may predispose them to choose particular forms. A task is intended to result in language use that bears a resemblance, direct or indirect,

> to the way language is used in the real world. Like other language activities, a task can engage productive or receptive, and oral or written skills and also various cognitive processes.

My own definition is that a pedagogical task is 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.

While these definitions vary somewhat, they all emphasize the fact that pedagogical tasks involve communicative language use in which the user's attention is focused on meaning rather than grammatical form. This does not mean that form is not important. My own definition refers to the deployment of grammatical knowledge to express meaning, highlighting the fact that meaning and form are highly interrelated, and that grammar exists to enable the language user to express different communicative meanings. However, as Willis and Willis (2001) point out, tasks differ from grammatical exercises in that learners are free to use a range of language structures to achieve task outcomes – the forms are not specified in advance.

Reflect
Drawing on the above discussion, come up with your own definition of a pedagogical 'task'.

In the rest of the book, when I use the term 'task' I will be referring, in general, to pedagogical tasks. When the term refers specifically to target or real-world tasks, this will be indicated.

Broader curricular consideration

'Curriculum' is a large and complex concept, and the term itself is used in a number of different ways. In some contexts, it is used to refer to a particular program of study, as in 'the science curriculum' or 'the mathematics curriculum'. In other contexts, it is synonymous with 'syllabus'. Over fifty years ago, Ralph Tyler, the 'father' of modern curriculum study, proposed a 'rational' curriculum model that is developed by firstly identifying goals and objectives (syllabus), then listing, organizing and grading learning experiences (methodology), and finally finding means

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