Designing Tasks for the Communicative Classroom

David Nunan

National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research,
Macquarie University, Sydney

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Dedication
To Jennifer and Rebecca
for the unread stories and the unplayed games

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Acknowledgements

Introduction

The purpose of the book

The purpose of this book is to provide teachers with a practical introduction to the design and development of communicative language learning tasks. Although the idea of using the learning 'task' as a basic planning tool is not a new one in the general educational field, it is a relatively recent arrival on the language teaching scene, and there remains some confusion about the place of tasks within the curriculum. The central question here is: should the specification of learning tasks be seen as part of syllabus design or of methodology?

In this book, I shall argue that, with the development of communicative language teaching, the separation of syllabus design and methodology becomes increasingly problematical. If we maintain the traditional distinction between syllabus design and methodology, seeing syllabus design as being primarily concerned with the specification of what learners will learn, and methodology as being mainly concerned with specifying how learners will learn, then the design of learning tasks is part of methodology. However, if we see curriculum planning as an integrated set of processes involving, among other things, the specification of both what and how, then the argument over whether the design and development of tasks belongs to syllabus design or to methodology becomes unimportant.

The examples of learning tasks in the book have been taken from a variety of sources. The ideas presented are relevant to teachers working in, or preparing for, a range of situations with a variety of learner types. Thus, it should be useful to teachers of children as well as of adults, to foreign as well as second language teachers, and to teachers of ESP (English for Specific Purposes) as well as of general purpose English.

Alongside the practical aspects of the subject, I have tried to deal with theoretical issues in ways which are non-trivial, yet are accessible to non-specialists.

It tends to be the custom, in books of this sort, to append a list of questions to the end of each chapter. I have adopted a rather different approach by inserting questions into the text itself. At various points readers will find that they are invited to reflect on key points and questions, and relate these to their own situation. While the answers I

would give to some of the questions will emerge in the subsequent text, for other questions there are no easy answers, or there may be no widespread consensus on what might count as an appropriate answer.

For much of this century, language teaching has been preoccupied with methods. In some extreme cases this has led to a search for the 'right method'. Methods tend to exist as package deals, each with its own set of method'. Methods tend to exist as package deals, each with its own set of principles and operating procedures, each with its own set of preferred learning tasks.

In this book, I shall have very little to say about 'methods'. I do not accept that there is such a thing as the 'right method', and I do not intend to assign different tasks to different methodological pigeon-holes. Rather, I shall look at tasks in terms of their goals, the input data, linguistic or otherwise, on which they are based, the activities derived from the input, and the roles and settings implied by different tasks for teachers and learners. I shall also look at the issues involved in sequencing and integrating tasks, as well as at the factors to be considered in grading tasks. The final chapter of the book is devoted to an exploration of the role of tasks in teacher development, particularly in the use of task analysis as a means of encouraging a reflective methodology; that is, planning one's teaching on the basis of what actually happens in classrooms rather than on abstract statements about what should happen.

Traditional approaches to methodology tend to analyse tasks in terms of the macroskills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. While most tasks take one or other of the macroskills as their principal point of focus, I have chosen to organise this analysis around what I consider to be three central characteristics: task goals, input, and activities. We shall also look at settings and learner and teacher roles implied by tasks. There are several reasons for adopting this approach rather than analysing tasks purely in terms of macroskills. In the first place, few tasks involve only one skill. It is rare that one only reads, or listens, or speaks, or writes. Therefore, it is often difficult to assign tasks to one skill label or another. Secondly, I hope to encourage teachers to think more about the integration and sequencing of tasks. The major purpose of this book then is to provide teachers with a framework for analysing learning tasks which will help them select, adapt or create their own learning tasks. I hope that the book might be of some assistance in assigning the search for the one right method to the dustbin and in helping teachers develop, select or adapt tasks which are appropriate in terms of goals, input, activities, roles and settings, and difficulty.

The structure of the book

Chapter 1 sets out some of the basic issues in relation to communicative learning tasks. The sense in which the term 'task' is to be used in the rest of the book is established, and the place of tasks within the curriculum is outlined. There is a short section on communicative language teaching, and the role of the learner is discussed.

Chapter 2 considers some of the central issues involved in language and learning relating these to tasks. We shall look in particular at what is involved in listening, speaking, reading and writing in another language. The debate over whether tasks should have a real-world or pedagogic rationale is presented and we shall look at how tasks are related to the wider curriculum through the specification of goals.

In Chapter 3 we look at the central characteristics of tasks and a scheme is presented for analysing tasks. I suggest that, minimally, communicative tasks consist of some form of input data plus an activity. The input may be linguistic (i.e. spoken or written language) non-linguistic (picture, sequences, diagrams, photos etc.) or a combination of the two (charts, maps, illustrated instructions etc.). These form the point of departure for the task. The activity specifies what learners are to do with the input. We shall examine some of the central issues surrounding the selection of data and activities, looking in particular at the issues of authenticity and activity focus.

Chapter 4 looks at the roles for teachers and learners which are implicit in any task. We shall see how these roles change as the focus of the activity changes, and we shall explore some of the classroom implications of role variability.

In Chapters 5 and 6, there is a shift of attention. We are no longer concerned with the characteristics of tasks in isolation, but with tasks in relation to one another. Chapter 5 is concerned with some of the issues and difficulties involved in grading tasks. Chapter 6 presents the options available in sequencing and integrating tasks to form lessons or units of work.

Chapter 7 is devoted to tasks and teacher development. We take further the notion, introduced in Chapter 1, that tasks form a useful point of entry into the study of the curriculum. We look at task construction and evaluation, and suggestions are made for introducing tasks in teacher development workshops.

1 Learning tasks and the language curriculum

1.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the task as a basic building block in the language curriculum. We shall look at some definitions of the term, and see how tasks are related to other elements in the curriculum.

1.2 'Task' defined and described

What is a task?

In turning to the concept of 'task', the first thing we need to do is decide just what we mean by the term itself.

If we look at what other people have written, we find that the term has been defined in a variety of ways. In general education, and in other fields such as psychology, there are many different definitions of tasks. There is also quite a variety from within the field of second language teaching, as the following definitions show.

> [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' is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play, and in between.
>
> (Long 1985: 89)

This first definition is a non-technical, non-linguistic one. In fact, as the author points out, it describes the sorts of things that non-linguists would tell you they do if they were to be asked. (In the same way as learners, if asked why they are attending a language course, are more likely to say, 'So I can talk to my neighbours', than, 'So I can master the use of the subjunctive'.) The second thing to notice is that some of the examples provided may well not involve language (one can paint a fence without

talking). Finally, the tasks may be subsidiary components of a larger task: for example, the task of 'weighing a patient' may be a sub-component of the task 'giving a medical examination'.

This final point in fact raises a major problem with the concept of 'task' as a unit of analysis. Where do we draw the boundaries? How do we decide where one task ends and the next begins?

> You might like to consider how many discrete tasks there are in the extract on pages 7–9. Is there a single task with separate phases, or several tasks? (I shall present my own view later in the chapter.)

Now here is another definition, this time from a dictionary of applied linguistics:

> 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, Platt and Weber 1986: 289)

In this second definition, we see that 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. This distinction between what might be called 'pedagogic' tasks and 'real-world' tasks is an important one, and one which we shall look at in detail in Chapter 2.

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)

Pre-listening

1 a) Look carefully at this questionnaire.

What are your sleeping habits?

A short questionnaire to discover your sleeping habits

1 How much time do you spend on bedmaking?
a) 5 mins a day
b) 5 mins every other day
c) 5 mins a week

2 Before you go to bed do you
a) pull open the downstairs curtains
b) read
c) eat

3 After a night's sleep do you find that the covers
a) are as tidy as when you went to bed
b) are all over the floor
c) are in a heap in the middle of the bed

4 If you have trouble getting to sleep do you
a) count sheep
b) toss and turn
c) lie still and concentrate

5 If you wake up in the middle of the night is it because
a) you remember something you ought to have done
b) you're cold
c) you're hungry

6 If you hear a bump in the night do you
a) get up cautiously and investigate quietly
b) charge around the house with a weapon
c) turn over and go back to sleep

7 Do other people complain about your sleeping habits?
a) never
b) frequently
c) sometimes

8 When you have dreams are they mostly
a) dreams about work
b) nightmares
c) sweet dreams

Make sure that you understand all the words in it and that you know how they are pronounced.

b) Now, working in pairs, one of you should interview the other using this questionnaire. If there is time, change roles (that is, the interviewer should now be interviewed).

Maley and Moulding: Learning to Listen, p. 3

Listening

2 a) You will now hear a recorded interview on the tape. You should work on your own. As you listen, note down which of the suggested answers is nearest to the one given on the tape. If none of them fit, then try to note down what the answer was. Do not worry if you do not get all the information the first time. You will hear the tape at least three times. ☛━❶

b) When you have finished, work with a partner and compare your answers. Then check your answers with the teacher.

3 a) Stay with the same partner. You will now hear a second version of the interview. This time the interviewer does not ask all the questions and they are not in the same order as in the printed questionnaire. Once again try to decide which of the printed answers is nearest to the one given on the tape. ☛━❶

b) When you have finished, compare your answers in groups of four. Then check them with the teacher.

Intensive listening

4 a) Listen carefully to the first interview again, in pairs. This time try to find which of the man's sentences match the following reported sentences.
e.g. He explained that he had very little time.
'Well I'm in a bit of a hurry.'

i) He expressed concern that the interviewer might be invading his privacy.
ii) His opinion was that bedmaking was women's work.
iii) He had been told that he did not move much in his sleep.
iv) He answered that generally he had no problems in getting to sleep.
v) He disagreed that he was courageous – simply annoyed.
vi) He denied that other people had complained.
vii) He explained that he almost always forgot his dreams.
Check your answers with those of another pair. ☛━❶

4 b) Now do the same thing using interview 2.
i) He expressed reservations about the type of questions.
ii) He explained that he rarely had any difficulty in falling asleep.
iii) He explained that reading sent him to sleep.
iv) He found his dreams somewhat disturbing.
v) He denied that he snored.
vi) He agreed that he occupied more than half of the bed.
vii) He dismissed any complaints that people made. ☛━❶

Checking up

5 a) Listen to interview 1 again in groups of four. As you listen, note down in your own way (don't worry about the spelling) any words or phrases which you still do not understand. When you have finished, compare your notes with the others in the group. Perhaps someone else can help explain what you did not understand, and you may be able to help others. Finally, check any remaining problems by reading through the transcript on pages 51–5.

b) If there is time, work through interview 2 in the same way.

Maley and Moulding: Learning to Listen, pp. 4 and 5

> You might like to pause at this point and consider the similarities and differences between the three definitions which have been offered here. You might also like to think about which definition is most useful and meaningful for you.

The definitions we have looked at share one thing in common: they all imply that tasks involve communicative language use in which the user's attention is focused on meaning rather than linguistic structure. This is evident in the examples provided. Long mentions filling out a form, making an airline reservation, taking a driving test, etc. Richards *et al.* refer to drawing a map, listening to instructions and carrying out a command. Breen talks about problem solving and decision making (although his definition does allow for 'brief exercise types' which might conceivably include non-communicative tasks).

In general, I too will consider the communicative task as *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*. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right.

As we explore the development of tasks, we shall see that it is not always easy to draw a hard and fast distinction between 'communicative' and 'non-communicative' tasks. There are several reasons for this, not the least of which is the fact that meaning and form are closely interrelated. We use different grammatical forms to signal differences of meaning. In fact, good oral grammar exercises can and should be both meaningful and communicative.

What are the components of a task?

I shall want to suggest that, in analytic terms, tasks will contain some form of input data which might be verbal (for example a dialogue or reading passage) or non-verbal (for example a picture sequence) and an activity which is in some way derived from the input and which sets out what the learners are to do in relation to the input. The task will also have (implicitly or explicitly) a goal and roles for teachers and learners. In synthetic terms, we shall find, lessons and units of work will consist, among other things, of sequences of tasks, and the coherence of such lessons or units will depend on the extent to which the tasks have been integrated and sequenced in some principled way.
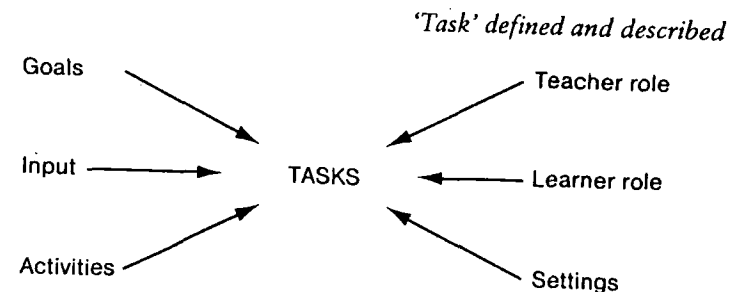
A framework for analysing communicative tasks

Let us consider your response to the extract from Maley and Moulding. There are five 'phases' to the unit. Some of these clearly qualify as communicative tasks, while others are less certain. The pre-listening, for example, is clearly a communicative task, as learners are involved in processing and producing language for communicative ends. The task is also complete in its own right. It can be characterised as follows:

Goal: Exchanging personal information
Input: Questionnaire on sleeping habits
Activity: i) Reading questionnaire
              ii) Asking and answering questions about sleeping habits
Teacher role: Monitor and facilitator
Learner role: Conversational partner
Setting: Classroom/pair work

Other phases in the unit are less clearly communicative, focusing learners on formal aspects of the language. However, it is important to bear in mind that it is not always easy to provide a simple definition or test which will give us a hard and fast method of distinguishing communicative tasks from other exercise and activity types, or of determining where one task ends and another begins. Making such decisions will always be partly intuitive and judgemental.

At this point, the description I have given may seem rather vague and imprecise. However, my characterisation of 'task' will become clearer once we have worked through a range of examples. For now, let us say that the task is a piece of meaning-focused work involving learners in comprehending, producing and/or interacting in the target language, and that tasks are analysed or categorised according to their goals, input data, activities, settings and roles.

1.3 Communicative language teaching

From the remarks already made, it should be obvious that the current interest in tasks stems largely from what has been termed 'the communicative approach' to language teaching. In this section I should like to briefly sketch out some of the more important principles underpinning communicative language teaching.

Although it is not always immediately apparent, everything we do in the classroom is underpinned by beliefs about the nature of language and about language learning. (We shall look at some of these beliefs in Chapter 2.) In recent years there have been some dramatic shifts in attitude towards both language and learning. This has sometimes resulted in contradictory messages to the teaching profession which, in turn, has led to confusion.

Among other things, it has been accepted that language is more than simply a system of rules. Language is now generally seen as a dynamic resource for the creation of meaning. In terms of learning, it is generally accepted that we need to distinguish between 'learning that' and 'knowing how'. In other words, we need to distinguish between knowing various grammatical rules and being able to use the rules effectively and appropriately when communicating.

This view has underpinned communicative language teaching (CLT). A great deal has been written and said about CLT, and it is something of a misnomer to talk about 'the communicative approach' as there is a family of approaches, each member of which claims to be 'communicative' (in fact, it is difficult to find approaches which claim not to be communicative!). There is also frequent disagreement between different members of the communicative family.

During the seventies, the insight that communication was an integrated process rather than a set of discrete learning outcomes created a dilemma for syllabus designers, whose task has traditionally been to produce ordered lists of structural, functional or notional items graded according to difficulty, frequency or pedagogic convenience. Processes belong to the domain of methodology. They are somebody else's business. They cannot be reduced to lists of items. For a time, it seems, the syllabus designer was to be out of business.

One of the clearest presentations of a syllabus proposal based on processes rather than products has come from Breen. He suggests that an alternative to the listing of linguistic content (the end point, as it were, in the learner's journey) would be to:

> . . . prioritize the route itself; a focusing upon the means towards
> the learning of a new language. Here the designer would give
> priority to the changing process of learning and the potential of the
> classroom – to the psychological and social resources applied to a

> new language by learners in the classroom context. . . . a greater
> concern with capacity for communication rather than repertoire of
> communication, with the activity of learning a language viewed as
> important as the language itself, and with a focus upon means
> rather than predetermined objectives, all indicate priority of
> process over content.

(Breen 1984: 52–3)

What Breen is suggesting is that, with communication at the centre of the curriculum, the goal of that curriculum (individuals who are capable of using the target language to communicate with others) and the means (classroom activities which develop this capability) begin to merge; the syllabus must take account of both the ends and the means.

What then do we do with our more formal approaches to the specification of structures and skills? Can they be found a place in CLT? We can focus on this issue by considering the place of grammar.

For some time after the rise of CLT, the status of grammar in the curriculum was rather uncertain. Some linguists maintained that it was not necessary to teach grammar, that the ability to use a second language (knowing 'how') would develop automatically if the learner were required to focus on meaning in the process of using the language to communicate. In recent years, this view has come under serious challenge, and it now seems to be widely accepted that there is value in classroom tasks which require learners to focus on form. It is also accepted that grammar is an essential resource in using language communicatively.

This is certainly Littlewood's view. In his introduction to communicative language teaching, he suggests that the following skills need to be taken into consideration:

- The learner must attain as high a degree as possible of linguistic
  competence. That is, he must develop skill in manipulating the
  linguistic system, to the point where he can use it spontaneously
  and flexibly in order to express his intended message.
- The learner must distinguish between the forms he has mastered
  as part of his linguistic competence, and the communicative
  functions which they perform. In other words, items mastered as
  part of a linguistic system must also be understood as part of a
  communicative system.
- The learner must develop skills and strategies for using language
  to communicate meanings as effectively as possible in concrete
  situations. He must learn to use feedback to judge his success,
  and if necessary, remedy failure by using different language.
- The learner must become aware of the social meaning of
  language forms. For many learners, this may not entail the
  ability to vary their own speech to suit different social

circumstances, but rather the ability to use generally acceptable forms and avoid potentially offensive ones.

(Littlewood 1981: 6)

> At this point, you might like to consider your own position on this matter. Do you think that considerations of content selection and grading (i.e. selecting and grading grammar, functions, notions, topics, pronunciation, vocabulary etc.) should be kept separate from the selection and grading of tasks, or not?

As I have already pointed out, I take the view that any comprehensive curriculum needs to take account of both means and ends and must address both content and process. In the final analysis, it does not really matter whether those responsible for specifying learning tasks are called 'syllabus designers' or 'methodologists'. What matters is that both processes and outcomes are taken care of and that there is a compatible and creative relationship between the two.

Whatever the position taken, there is no doubt that the development of communicative language teaching has had a profound effect on both methodology and syllabus design, and has greatly enhanced the status of the learning 'task' within the curriculum.

1.4 Curriculum development and learning tasks

'Curriculum' is a large and complex concept, and the term 'curriculum' is used in a number of different ways. In some contexts it is used to refer to a particular programme of study (for example the 'science curriculum' or the 'mathematics curriculum'). In other contexts, it is used more widely. I shall use 'syllabus' to refer to the selecting and grading of content, and 'curriculum' more widely to refer to all aspects of planning, implementing, evaluating and managing an educational programme (Nunan 1988).

Around forty years ago, Ralph Tyler suggested that a rational curriculum is developed by first identifying goals and objectives, then by listing, organising and grading the learning experiences, and finally, by finding means for determining whether the goals and objectives have been achieved (Tyler 1949).

More recently, it has been suggested that at the very minimum a curriculum should offer the following:

A. *In planning:*
   1. Principles for the selection of content – what is to be learned and taught.

   2. Principles for the development of a teaching strategy – how it is to be learned and taught.
   3. Principles for the making of decisions about sequence.
   4. Principles on which to diagnose the strengths and weaknesses of individual students and differentiate the general principles 1, 2 and 3 above, to meet individual cases.

B. *In empirical study:*
   1. Principles on which to study and evaluate the progress of students.
   2. Principles on which to study and evaluate the progress of teachers.
   3. Guidance as to the feasibility of implementing the curriculum in varying school contexts, pupil contexts, environments and peer-group situations.
   4. Information about the variability of effects in differing contexts and on different pupils and an understanding of the causes of the variation.

C. *In relation to justification:*
   A formulation of the intention or aim of the curriculum which is accessible to critical scrutiny.

(Stenhouse 1975: 5)

This rather imposing (although by no means exhaustive) list serves to demonstrate just how comprehensive the field of curriculum study can be.

Turning more specifically to language teaching, the distinction traditionally drawn between syllabus design and methodology suggests that syllabus design deals with the selection and grading of content, while methodology is concerned with the selection and sequencing of learning activities. If one sticks to the traditional distinction, then task design would seem to belong to the realm of methodology. However, with the development of communicative language teaching, as I have indicated, the distinction between syllabus design and methodology becomes difficult to sustain: one needs not only to specify both the content (or ends of learning) and the tasks (or means to those ends) but also to integrate them. This suggests a broad perspective on curriculum in which concurrent consideration is given to content, methodology and evaluation.

Within this perspective, I make one substantial departure from the 'traditional' approach to curriculum design. With a traditional approach, such as the one suggested by Tyler, the curriculum designer first decides on the goals and objectives of instruction. Once these have been satisfactorily specified, the curriculum content is specified. The learning experiences are then decided upon, and, finally, the means for assessing learners and evaluating the curriculum are established. The process is

thus a linear one which operates in one direction, with a feedback loop from evaluation to goals as the following diagram shows:

Goals → Content → Experiences (Tasks) → Evaluation
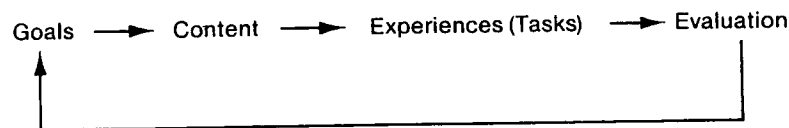
Applying this to language curricula, one would first decide on why one's learners are coming along to learn in the first place. This would provide a rationale for the specification of grammatical items, functions, notions topics and so on. The learning experiences (or, as we are calling them, tasks) would be specified. Finally, means would be established for deciding whether the content has been learned and the goals achieved. This final evaluative step would allow us to decide whether our goals, content and tasks need to be modified.

But while this might seem to be a logical way of designing a curriculum, in practice it can be unnecessarily rigid: a more flexible approach, in which content and tasks are developed in tandem, generally leads to a more satisfactory and coherent end product. Taking a set of curriculum goals as our point of departure, we simultaneously specify content and develop learning tasks. We might illustrate such a process as follows:

Goals → [Content ↑↓ Tasks] → Evaluation
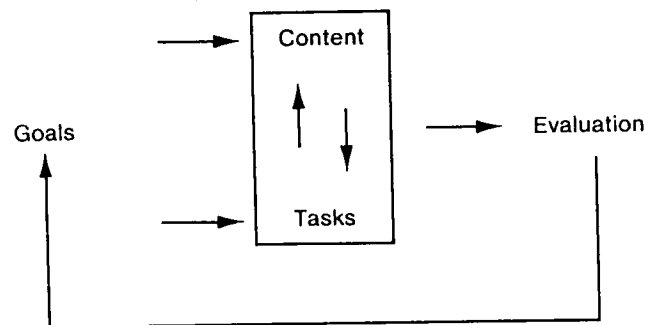
In this model, content and tasks are developed in tandem so that content can suggest tasks and vice versa. There is also a feedback loop so that the results of the evaluation can be fed back into the curriculum planning process.

The following example should serve to exemplify this process.

Imagine we are developing a curriculum for second language learners who want to study in English at university. Such a curriculum will have the following sorts of goals:
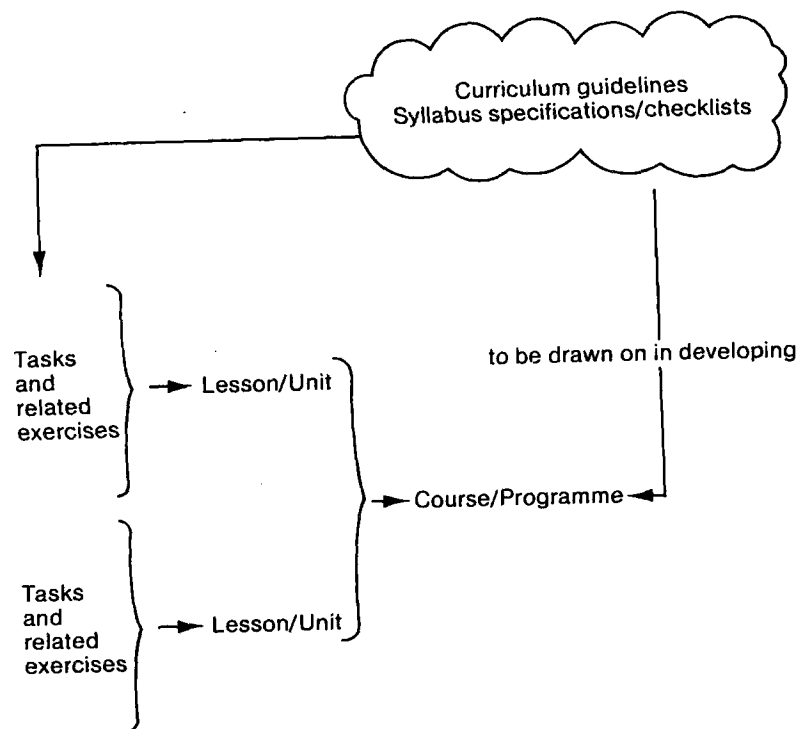
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— Reading academic texts
— Taking part in tutorial discussions
— Obtaining and recording information from academic lectures
— Writing formal essays

In developing a unit of work for a goal such as 'reading academic texts' we might have as resources a number of syllabus checklists which specify topics, grammar, vocabulary etc. and input data in the form of a variety of reading texts and extracts. We would examine a given text and decide on an activity or sequence of activities requiring the learner to extract and transform the key information contained in the text in some way (for example, by completing a diagram). We would also determine which aspects of the content learners would need to engage in to complete the task successfully. This might include finding the meaning of a range of vocabulary items, comprehending logical relationships, identifying anaphoric links and understanding relative clauses. Separate exercises would be written for these, and the items would be checked off against our syllabus checklists. In this way, the syllabus would evolve in the course of preparing the programme, rather than preceding the specification of learning tasks and other exercise types.

So far I have described the curriculum process from the perspective of the curriculum or syllabus designer. Such people usually work at a more general or abstract level than those actually responsible for developing teaching materials, or for the day-to-day task of teaching. Classroom teachers, for instance, are generally presented with curriculum guidelines or sets of syllabus specifications, and are required to develop their courses and programmes from these. As their immediate focus is on the day-to-day schedule of work with learners in classrooms, their conception of tasks is somewhat different from that presented above. They tend to see lessons or units of work as the basic building blocks of their programmes. These lessons and units in turn are composed of sets of more or less integrated tasks and manipulative exercises of various sorts. The teacher's immediate preoccupation is thus with learning tasks and with integrating these into lessons and/or units (Nunan 1987; Shavelson and Stern 1981).

For the classroom teacher, then, a planning framework is likely to look something like the following:

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I am not trying to suggest that there is no longer any place for syllabus specifications as traditionally conceived, but rather that their place in the design process takes on a rather different function. Rather than working from syllabus items to tasks, I see syllabus specifications as traditionally conceived (i.e. lists of content) as being of most value as checklists and frameworks which can provide coherence and continuity to the course design and materials development process. For example, one might be developing materials for a 200-hour beginner's course. The syllabus (which will be used by the examiners to set an end-of-course examination) specifies sets of grammatical, phonological, lexical, functional and notional items to be covered. Rather than identifying a particular item, say 'talking about oneself', 'nationalities' and the verb 'be', and creating a text and a task to teach these items, one might find or create an interesting/relevant text and task at the appropriate level of difficulty, and then identify which language items on the syllabus checklist can be introduced or taught through the text/task. The course designer/ materials writer's task is thus to carry out a delicate juggling act between the various curriculum components, including sets of syllabus specifications, task and activity types, texts and input data.

1.5　The role of the learner

So far, we have considered how within CLT course designers and teachers might make use of the notion of task. Another trend in recent years which has stemmed from CLT has been the development of learner-centred approaches to language teaching, in which information by and from learners is used in planning, implementing and evaluating language programmes. While the learner-centred curriculum will contain similar elements and processes to traditional curricula, a key difference will be that information by and from learners will be built into every phase of the curriculum process. Curriculum development becomes a collaborative effort between teachers and learners, since learners will be involved in decisions on content selection, methodology and evaluation (Nunan 1988).

The notion of task therefore has an immediate relevancy, and planning for the teacher is a matter of putting tasks together, whatever the more general 'syllabus' or 'curriculum' sets out. Thus, while curriculum designers are more likely to take a long-term perspective, setting out plans for semesters and years, teachers and materials writers more often do their detailed planning in relation to lessons or units of work. In Chapter 6, we shall look at various ways in which chains of tasks can be integrated and sequenced to form coherent units of work.

> At this point, you might like to pause and reflect on the way the notion of 'task', as already described, fits into the scheme of things in your own situation as teacher, programme planner or course designer. Which of the diagrams set out in this section corresponds most closely to your own view? Which 'unit' of organisation do you regularly build your work around?

> Of course, no curriculum will ever be totally subject-centred or totally learner-centred. However, even within institutions in which teachers and learners have minimal input into the curriculum development process it is possible to introduce elements of learner-centredness. It is worth considering the ways in which your curriculum might be modified to make it more learner-centred.

The philosophical reasons for adopting a learner-centred approach to teaching have been reinforced by research into second language acquisition as well as work in the area of learning styles (Willing 1988).

Breen, who has written a great deal on learner-centred language teaching, has pointed out the advantages of linking learner-centredness with learning tasks. He draws attention to the frequent disparity between what the teacher intends as the outcome of a task and what the learners actually derive from it. (We may parallel this with a similar disparity between what curriculum documents say ought to happen, and what actually happens in the classroom.) Learning outcomes will be influenced by learners' perceptions about what they should contribute, their views about the nature and demands of the task, and their definitions of the situation in which the task takes place. Additionally, we cannot know for certain how different learners are likely to carry out a task. We tend to assume that the way we look at a task will be the way learners look at it. However, there is evidence that while we as teachers are focusing on one thing, learners are focusing on something else. How can we be sure, then, that learners will not look for grammatical patterns when taking part in activities which were designed to focus them on meaning, and look for meaning in tasks designed to focus them on grammatical forms?

One way of dealing with this tendency is to involve learners in designing or selecting tasks. It should also be possible to allow learners choices in deciding what to do and how to do it. This of course implies a major change in the roles assigned to learners and teachers. Here I am suggesting that the task is likely to have the same psychological/operational reality for the learner as it has for the teacher. By using it as a design unit, one opens to the student the possibility of planning and monitoring learning – one breaks down the hierarchic barriers as it were. This is not to say that the teacher and learner will view the same task in the same way and attach the same 'meanings' to it. Nor does it absolve the teacher from the responsibility of ensuring that through a sequence of tasks the appropriate 'formal curricula' are covered. These are issues of teacher and learner roles to which we shall return in Chapter 4.

1.6   Conclusion

In this chapter, I have introduced and defined 'task' in relation to the general field of language curriculum design. I have attempted to spell out some of the relationships between the concepts of curriculum, syllabus, methodology and task. I have suggested that tasks can be analysed in terms of their goals, input data, activities, settings and roles. I have tried to demonstrate how tasks can be used as building blocks in developing lessons and units of work, and how this development can proceed

through the simultaneous specification of content and tasks. Finally, I have tried to indicate that the notion of task seems to be one to which teachers and learners can relate.

In the next chapter, we shall look in greater detail at the nature of communicative language learning and use from the perspective of the macroskills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. In particular, we shall consider how what we know about the macroskills can be incorporated into task design.

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