Task-based Language Learning and Teaching

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Contents

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Preface

I decided to write a book about task-based learning and teaching for a number of reasons. One is my personal commitment to a form of teaching that treats language primarily as a tool for communicating rather than as an object for study or manipulation. It is clear to me that if learners are to develop the competence they need to use a second language easily and effectively in the kinds of situations they meet *outside* the classroom they need to experience how language is used as a tool for communicating *inside* it. 'Task' serves as the most obvious means for organizing teaching along these lines. Another reason is my interest in and knowledge of second language acquisition research (SLA). 'Task' has served as both a research instrument for investigating L2 acquisition and also as a construct that has been investigated in its own right. Thus 'task' has assumed a pivotal position in SLA. A third, and probably the most important reason for writing this book, is my wish to see SLA develop not just as an autonomous discipline (and I think it clearly has moved in this direction in the last decade) but also as an applied area of study. SLA began with firm links to language teaching back in the 1960s and I would like to see these links maintained. The study of 'tasks' serves to bring SLA and language pedagogy together. It is a construct they have in common and thus is the ideal means for establishing bridges between the two fields.

This book attempts to examine 'task' from a variety of different perspectives. I have deliberately chosen not to present a personal view of tasks but to strive for a rounded, balanced account of how tasks have figured in both SLA and language pedagogy. I have, however, largely limited myself to psycholinguistic accounts of tasks, as these are what I know and understand best. However, in the last chapter, I do acknowledge the need for perspectives provided by education and critical pedagogy to be considered. Of course, there is no such thing as a truly objective and balanced account of tasks. Inevitably, my own particular thinking on tasks creeps in.

This is not a 'how to' book (although I can see the need for such a book). A practitioner looking for clear guidance about how to conduct task-based research or teaching may be disappointed. It is a book *about* task-based research and teaching. It seeks not to instruct but to illuminate, and hopefully to challenge. It attempts to identify the problems as well as the

advantages of task-based teaching. In *SLA Research and Language Teaching* (Ellis 1997a) I argued, drawing on Stenhouse (1975), that the goal of theory and research in SLA is not to direct teachers how to teach but rather to advance a number of 'provisional specifications' that teachers can then try out, adapting them to their own particular teaching contexts. It is in this spirit that this book is written.

1 Tasks in SLA and language pedagogy

Introduction

Second language acquisition (SLA) researchers and language teachers both seek to elicit samples of language use from learners. In the case of researchers these samples are needed to investigate how second language (L2) learning takes place. In the case of teachers, these samples serve as the means by which learners can be helped to learn and as evidence that successful learning is taking place. Furthermore, both researchers and teachers recognize that the samples they elicit can vary according to the extent to which learners focus on using language correctly as opposed to simply communicating a message. For example, samples elicited by means of blank-filling exercises are likely to reflect the learners' attention to accuracy whereas samples elicited by means of some kind of communicative activity are more likely to reflect how learners use the L2 for message conveyance.

Increasingly, both researchers and teachers acknowledge the need to elicit samples of language use that are representative of how learners perform when they are not attending to accuracy. Such samples, it is believed, provide evidence of learners' ability to use their L2 knowledge in real-time communication. SLA researchers recognize the importance of such samples for documenting how learners structure and restructure their interlanguages over time. Teachers recognize that unless learners are given the opportunity to experience such samples they may not succeed in developing the kind of L2 proficiency needed to communicate fluently and effectively. The question arises, then, as to how these samples of meaning-focused language use can be elicited. The means that both have employed are 'tasks'.

Tasks, then, hold a central place in current SLA research and also in language pedagogy. This is evident in the large number of recent publications relating to task-based learning and teaching (for example, Willis 1996; Skehan 1998; Lee 2000; Language Teaching Research Vol. 4.3, 2000; Bygate *et al.* 2001). These publications raise many issues. What exactly is a task? Can tasks be designed in such a way that they predetermine language use? How does L2 learning take place as a product of performing tasks? What is task-based language pedagogy? How can language courses be constructed

around tasks? How can tasks be used to assess what learners can do in the L2? These are the questions this book seeks to address. It will examine the theories of language acquisition and use that have informed research into tasks. It will also discuss the principles and practice of task-based language pedagogy, and the extent to which these are underwritten by research.

This chapter will begin by examining a number of definitions of a 'task', and discuss the important distinction between 'unfocused' and 'focused' tasks. A framework for describing tasks is developed and applied to the description of actual tasks. The second half of the chapter examines tasks from the perspective of SLA research and of language pedagogy, providing an overview of the key issues.

Defining a 'task'

What exactly is a 'task'? How does a 'task' differ from other devices used to elicit learner language, for example, an 'activity', or an 'exercise', or 'drill'. It should be acknowledged from the start that in neither research nor language pedagogy is there complete agreement as to what constitutes a task, making definition problematic (Crookes 1986: 1), nor is there consistency in the terms employed to describe the different devices for eliciting learner language. Figure 1.1 provides a number of definitions of task, drawn from both the research and pedagogic literatures. These definitions address a number of dimensions: (1) the scope of a task, (2) the perspective from which a task is viewed, (3) the authenticity of a task, (4) the linguistic skills required to perform a task, (5) the psychological processes involved in task performance, and (6) the outcome of a task.

Scope

A broad definition, such as that provided by Long (1985), includes tasks that require language, for example, making an airline reservation, and tasks that can be performed without using language, for example, painting a fence. However, more narrow definitions, such as those of Richards, Platt, and Weber (1985) and Nunan (1989) define task as an activity that necessarily involves language. Given that the overall goal of tasks, in both research and teaching, is to elicit language use, as suggested by Crookes' (1986) definition, there seems little sense in extending the term to include language-free activities. Therefore, in this book, we will be concerned only with tasks whose successful completion involves language.

Differences regarding scope involve another important distinction, which is more central to the role tasks have played in research and teaching. Should the term 'task' be restricted to activities where the learners' attention is primarily focused on message conveyance or should it include any kind of language activity including those designed to get learners to

display their knowledge of what is correct usage? Long (1985), Richards, Platt, and Weber (1985), Nunan (1989), and Skehan (1996a) clearly wish to restrict the use of term to activities where meaning is primary. Breen (1989), however, adopts a broader definition that incorporates any kind of language activity, including 'exercises'. His definition seems synonymous with the term 'activity'. Given the importance that is currently attached to meaning-focused communication both in theories of L2 acquisition and of language pedagogy, there is a clear need for a term to label devices that elicit this type of language use. I will adopt the narrower definition, then. 'Tasks' are activities that call for primarily meaning-focused language use. In contrast, 'exercises' are activities that call for primarily form-focused language use. However, we need to recognize that the overall purpose of tasks is the same as exercises—learning a language—the difference lying in the means by which this purpose is to be achieved.

It might be objected that this distinction is somewhat simplistic. As Widdowson (1998) has pointed out, learners will need to pay attention to both meaning and form in both tasks and exercises. For example, learners involved in 'making an airline reservation' will need to find the linguistic forms to explain where they want to fly to, what day and time they want to fly, what kind of ticket they want, etc. Also, learners completing a blank filling exercise designed to practise the use of the past simple and present perfect tenses in English will need to pay attention to the meanings of sentences to determine which tense to use. Widdowson argues that what distinguishes a task from an exercise is not 'form' as opposed to 'meaning', but rather the *kind* of meaning involved. Whereas a task is concerned with 'pragmatic meaning', i.e. the use of language in context, an exercise is concerned with 'semantic meaning', i.e. the systemic meanings that specific forms can convey irrespective of context. However, it is precisely this distinction that the terms 'form-focused' and 'meaning-focused' are intended to capture, so Widdowson's objection is more one of terminology than substance.

The distinction between meaning-focused and form-focused is also intended to capture another key difference between an exercise and a task relating to the role of the participants. Thus, a 'task' requires the participants to function primarily as 'language users' in the sense that they must employ the same kinds of communicative processes as those involved in real-world activities. Thus, any learning that takes place is incidental. In contrast, an 'exercise' requires the participants to function primarily as 'learners'; here learning is intentional. In short, as Widdowson (1998) notes, there is a fundamental difference between 'task' and 'exercise' according to whether linguistic skills are viewed as developing through communicative activity or as a prerequisite for engaging in it. However, when learners engage in tasks they do not always focus on meaning and act as language users. Nor indeed is this the intention of tasks. While a task

1 **Breen** (1989)
A task is 'a structured plan for the provision of opportunities for the refinement of knowledge and capabilities entailed in a new language and its use during communication'. Breen specifically states that a 'task' can be 'a brief practice exercise' or 'a more complex workplan that requires spontaneous communication of meaning'.

2 **Long** (1985)
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. "Tasks" are the things people will tell you they do if you ask them and they are not applied linguists'.

3 **Richards, Platt, and Weber** (1985)
A task is 'an activity or action which is carried out as the result of processing or understanding language, i.e. as a response. For example, drawing a map while listening to a tape, and 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 teaching more communicative ... since it provides a purpose for classroom activity which goes beyond practice of language for its own sake'.

4 **Crookes** (1986)
A task is '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'.

5 **Prabhu** (1987)
A task is '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'.

6 **Nunan** (1989)
A communicative task is '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'.

7 **Skehan** (1996a)
A task is 'an activity in which: meaning is primary; there is some sort of relationship to the real world; task completion has some priority; and the assessment of task performance is in terms of task outcome'.

8 **Lee** (2000)
A task is '(1) a classroom activity or exercise that has: (a) an objective obtainable only by the interaction among participants, (b) a mechanism for structuring and sequencing interaction, and (c) a focus on meaning exchange; (2) a language learning endeavor that requires learners to comprehend, manipulate, and/or produce the target language as they perform some set of workplans'.

9 **Bygate, Skehan, and Swain (2001)**
'A task is an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective.'

Figure 1.1: Examples of definitions of a 'task'

requires a learner to act *primarily* as a language user and give focal attention to message conveyance, it allows for peripheral attention to be paid to deciding what forms to use. Also, when performing a task, learners' focal attention may switch momentarily to form as they temporarily adopt the role of language learners. Thus, the extent to which a learner acts as language user or language learner and attends to message or code when undertaking tasks and exercises is best seen as variable and probabilistic rather than categorical.

Perspective

Perspective refers to whether a task is seen from the task designer's or the participants' point of view. This is relevant to the distinction between meaning-focused and form-focused. A task may have been designed to encourage a focus-on-meaning but, when performed by a particular group of learners, it may result in display rather than communicative language use. As Hosenfeld (1976) has pointed out, learners are adroit at redefining activities to suit their own purposes. Thus the 'task-as-workplan' may or may not match the 'task-as-process' (Breen 1989). Do we decide whether an activity is a 'task' by examining the intention of the task designer, i.e. the task-as-workplan, or the learners' actual performance of the task, i.e. the task-as-process? Most of the definitions in Figure 1.1 (Richards, Platt, and Weber 1985; Prabhu 1987; Breen 1989; Nunan 1989; Lee 2000) adopt the task-designer's perspective and I will do likewise: a task is, to use Breen's (1989) term, a 'workplan' that is intended to engage the learner in meaning-focused language use.[1] Of course, a task can be successful, i.e. it actually results in meaning-focused communication; or unsuccessful, i.e. it results in learners displaying their knowledge of language; or, as is often the case, it can be more or less successful/unsuccessful. One of the goals of task-based research is to establish whether the predictions made by designers are actually borne out.

The instructions, or what Bachman and Palmer (1996) call 'rubric', are an essential part of the task workplan. They specify what the purpose of the task is, i.e. its outcome, and what the participants need to do to reach

an outcome. They constitute what Lee (2000) calls 'a mechanism for structuring and sequencing interaction' as the participants perform the task. The task rubric, then, creates the context for the participants to function as language users.

Authenticity

Authenticity concerns whether a task needs to correspond to some real-world activity, i.e. achieve situational authenticity. The examples that Long (1985) provides indicate that for him a task must be real-world.[2] 'Painting a fence', 'dressing a child', 'borrowing a library book', etc. are activities that occur in day-to-day living. The 'survival tasks', for example, filling in various kinds of official forms, which are common in 'second' (as opposed to 'foreign') language classes, are further examples of real-world tasks. However, there are many tasks that have been used by both researchers and teachers which are patently not real-world. For example, telling a story based on a series of pictures, describing a picture so someone else can draw it, identifying the differences in two pictures, deciding where to locate buildings on a map are all activities that language learners are unlikely to ever carry out in their lives. Such tasks, however, can be said to manifest 'some sort of relationship to the real world' (Skehan 1996a) in that they could possibly occur outside the classroom but more especially because the kind of language behaviour they elicit corresponds to the kind of communicative behaviour that arises from performing real-world tasks. For example, in a picture-drawing task, the participants will need to negotiate their way to a shared understanding by asking questions and clarifying meanings—aspects of interactional authenticity. The definition of task that informs this book will include tasks that are both situationally authentic and/or seek to achieve interactional authenticity.

Language skill

Most of the definitions in Figure 1.1 do not explicitly address what linguistic skills are involved in performing tasks. Long's examples make it clear that a task can involve both oral and written activities, for example, 'making an airline reservation', and 'writing a cheque'. Bygate *et al.*'s (2001) definition is intended to apply to written as well as oral tasks. Richards, Platt, and Weber (1985) explicitly state that a task 'may or may not involve the production of language', giving an example of a listening task, 'drawing a map while listening to a tape'. Presumably, too, they would allow that tasks can be directed at reading. However, the literature on tasks, both research-based and pedagogic (for example, Ur 1981; Klippel 1984;

Day 1986; Crookes and Gass 1993a and 1993b; Bygate, Skehan, and Swain 2001), assumes that tasks are directed at oral skills, particularly speaking. Of course, the materials for the task may also involve some reading and, if a planning stage is involved, learners may also be required to write, but the assumption is that the task itself is performed orally. In this book, 'task' will be used to refer to activities involving any of the four language skills. However, as the main purpose of the book is to provide an overview of task-based research and pedagogy to date, the contents will reflect the emphasis placed on oral tasks.

Cognitive processes

One of the more interesting differences in the definitions provided in Figure 1.1 concerns the nature of the processes involved in task performance. Richards, Platt, and Weber (1985) explicitly refer to 'processing and understanding *language*' and, quite naturally, this concern for language underlies several of the other definitions. Nunan (1989), for example, talks about tasks involving learners in 'comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language'. However, there is a cognitive as well as a linguistic dimension to tasks.

Prabhu's (1987) definition is alone in calling attention to the cognitive processes entailed by tasks. He talks about tasks involving 'some process of thought'. For Prabhu, tasks should ideally involve learners in 'reasoning'—making connections between pieces of information, deducing new information, and evaluating information.[3] While such a definition is well-suited to the kinds of tasks that Prabhu himself prefers, for example, working out a schedule of a visit based on railway timetables, it is probably too exclusive. There are many information- and opinion-sharing activities that are commonly seen as 'tasks' that do not involve reasoning, for example, spotting the difference between two pictures, although they may well involve other cognitive skills, for example, perceptual skills.

Tasks, however, clearly do involve cognitive processes such as selecting, reasoning, classifying, sequencing information, and transforming information from one form of representation to another. One of the limitations of both SLA research and language pedagogy is that insufficient attention has been paid to the cognitive dimension of tasks. It seems reasonable to suppose that there will be a relationship between the level of cognitive processing required and the kind of structuring and restructuring of language that tasks are designed to bring about. As Craik and Tulving (1975) have pointed out, retention depends on the 'elaborateness of the final encoding', with material more likely to be remembered when information is more deeply processed. Robinson (2001) suggests that tasks vary in their complexity according to the cognitive demands placed on learners

and distinguishes what he calls 'resource-directing' factors, for example, +/– reasoning demands, and 'resource-depleting' factors, for example, whether or not a secondary task accompanies the primary task. There is a clear need, then, to acknowledge the cognitive dimension of a task in any definition.

Outcomes

One feature of tasks in which most of the definitions in Figure 1.1 concur is that they result in some clear outcome, other than simply the use of language; that is, the outcome of a task can be judged in terms of content. Thus, a narrative task based on pictures can be judged according to whether the learners have told the story successfully, i.e. have included all the main events and no 'false' events. Similarly a spot-the-difference task involving pictures can be evaluated according to whether the learners have successfully identified all the differences. The idea of a definite outcome or what Crookes (1986) calls 'a specified objective' is an essential feature of a task.

It is useful to distinguish between the 'outcome' and the 'aim' of a task. 'Outcome' refers to what the learners arrive at when they have completed the task, for example, a story, a list of differences, etc. 'Aim' refers to the pedagogic purpose of the task, which is to elicit meaning-focused language use, receptive and/or productive. This distinction is important. It is possible to achieve a successful outcome without achieving the aim of a task. For example, learners performing a spot-the-difference task based on pictures may successfully identify the differences by simply showing each other their pictures, but because they have not used language to identify these differences the aim of the task will not have been met.

In fact, tasks involve a sleight of hand. They need to convince learners that what matters is the outcome. Otherwise, there is a danger that the learners will subvert the aim of the task by displaying rather than using language. However, the real purpose of the task is not that learners should arrive at a successful outcome but that they should use language in ways that will promote language learning. In fact, the actual outcome of a task may be of no real pedagogic importance. For example, whether learners successfully identify the difference between two pictures is not what is crucial for language learning. It is the cognitive and linguistic processes involved in reaching the outcome that matter. Thus, although in one sense, and certainly from the learners' perspective it is correct to claim that 'the assessment of task performance is in terms of task outcome' (Skehan 1996a), in another, perhaps more important sense, is not. Ultimately the assessment of task performance must lie in whether learners manifest the kind of language use believed to promote language learning.

The definitions in Figure 1.1 and the preceding discussion reflect a general, decontextualized view of what a task is. Bygate, Skehan, and Swain (2001: 11) have rightly pointed out that 'definitions of task will need to differ according to the purposes for which tasks are used'. They suggest, for example, that somewhat different definitions are needed for pedagogy and research and, further, that definitions will need to vary depending on what aspect of pedagogy or research (teachers and teaching; learners and learning; testing) are at stake. They propose a 'basic, all-purpose definition' (the one included in Figure 1.1) and then show how this can be modified to reflect the different purposes of tasks. For example, if the purpose is 'testing' in the context of 'language pedagogy' they suggest the following definition:

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

Bygate, Skehan, and Swain are obviously correct that what constitutes a task is to some extent variable but there is also a need for a generalized definition (as, indeed, their own 'basic definition' recognizes) that can serve to identify the essential commonalities in tasks, irrespective of their actual use. It is such a definition that the next section seeks to provide.

Criterial features of a task

The following criterial features of a task can be identified:

1 A task is a workplan.
   A task constitutes a plan for learner activity. This workplan takes the form of teaching materials or of ad hoc plans for activities that arise in the course of teaching (see Note 1). The actual activity that results may or may not match that intended by the plan. A task, therefore, may not result in communicative behaviour.
2 A task involves a primary focus on meaning.
   A task seeks to engage learners in using language pragmatically rather than displaying language. It seeks to develop L2 proficiency through communicating. Thus, it requires a primary focus on meaning. To this end, a task will incorporate some kind of 'gap', i.e. an information, opinion, or reasoning gap. The gap motivates learners to use language in order to close it. The participants choose the linguistic and non-linguistic resources needed to complete the task. The workplan does not *specify* what language the task participants should use but rather allows them to choose the language needed to achieve the outcome of the task. However, as we have seen from the preceding discussion, a task creates a certain semantic space and also the need for certain cognitive

processes, which are linked to linguistic options. Thus, a task *constrains* what linguistic forms learners need to use, while allowing them the final choice. As Kumaravadivelu (1991: 99) puts it, tasks 'indicate' the content but 'the actual language to be negotiated in the classroom is left to the teacher and the learner'. However, as we shall shortly see, one type of task can be designed in such a way as to predispose learners to use a *specific* linguistic form, for example, a particular grammatical structure. This task type is discussed below. Even in this kind of task, however, the final choice of what resources to use is left up to the learner.

3 A task involves real-world processes of language use.

The workplan may require learners to engage in a language activity such as that found in the real world, for example, completing a form, or it may involve them in language activity that is artificial, for example, determining whether two pictures are the same or different. However, the processes of language use that result from performing a task, for example, asking and answering questions or dealing with misunderstandings, will reflect those that occur in real-world communication.

4 A task can involve any of the four language skills.

The workplan may require learners to: (1) listen to or read a text and display their understanding, (2) produce an oral or written text, or (3) employ a combination of receptive and productive skills. A task may require dialogic or monologic language use. In this respect, of course, tasks are no different from exercises.

5 A task engages cognitive processes.

The workplan requires learners to employ cognitive processes such as selecting, classifying, ordering, reasoning, and evaluating information in order to carry out the task. These processes influence but do not determine the choice of language; they circumscribe the range of linguistic forms a user will need to complete the task but allow the actual choice of forms to remain with the learner.

6 A task has a clearly defined communicative outcome.

The workplan stipulates the non-linguistic outcome of the task, which serves as the goal of the activity for the learners. The stated outcome of a task serves as the means for determining when participants have completed a task.

Figure 1.2 provides examples of language teaching activities. The extent to which these activities can be called 'tasks' can be determined by evaluating whether they satisfy the criterial features of a task given above.

Activity 1, 'A dangerous moment', is the kind of task favoured by sociolinguists who wish to elicit samples of vernacular language use. They argue that people are more likely to talk spontaneously when they are recounting a traumatic experience. This activity has all the characteristics of a task. (1) The workplan specifies what the two participants in the task are supposed

Activity 1
A dangerous moment

Student A

Have you ever been in a situation where you felt your life was in danger? Describe the situation to your partner. Tell him/her what happened. Give an account of how you felt when you were in danger and afterwards.

Student B

Listen to your partner tell you about a dangerous moment in his/her life. Draw a picture to show what happened to your partner. Show him/her your picture when you have finished it.

Activity 2
The same or different?

Work with a partner. Take it in turn to describe your pictures. Does your partner have the same picture as you or a different one? Ask your partner questions about his/her picture if you are not sure.
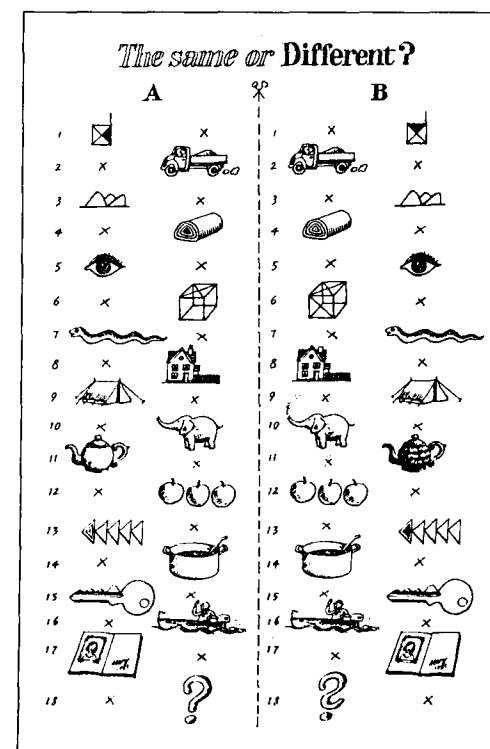
Activity 3
New students

Lesson 1

Here are some information cards for four new students in Level 2 at the English Language Academy. Some information is missing from them. Listen to the conversation and write in the missing information about the new students.

New Students

Name: _Gabriela_

Country: _Portugal_

Birth date: _8/25/50_

Married ☑

Single ☐

Occupation: _doctor_

Interest and hobbies:

reading & photography

Name: _Samuel_

Country: _____

Birth date: _2/4/65_

Married ☐

Single ☐

Occupation: _student_

Interest and hobbies:

classical music

Name: _Kuniko_

Country: _Japan_

Birth date: _____

Married ☐

Single ☐

Occupation: _____

Interest and hobbies:

volleyball & swimming

Name: _____

Country: _Morocco_

Birth date: _____

Married ☐

Single ☐

Occupation: _doctor_

Interest and hobbies:

_____

Complete the following summary about Kuniko:

Kuniko is _____ Japan. She was born on _____. She _____ married. She _____ Japanese. She is a student and she _____ to play volleyball and swim.

Now find out the same information about some of your classmates by interviewing each other. Complete an information card for each classmate you interview.

Activity 4
Asking for help

Work in pairs. One student looks at card A. The other looks at card B. Practise the conversation.

Card A

You are a student. You want your friend to help you with some homework.

A   Check if B is busy.

B   _____

A   Ask him/her to help you.

B   _____

A   Try to persuade him/her.

B   _____

A   Thank him/her.

Card B

You are a student. Your friend wants you to help him/her with homework. You are not keen.

A   _____

B   Tell him/her you are not doing anything.

A   _____

B   Refuse. Give a reason.

A   _____

B   Agree reluctantly.

A   _____

Activity 5
Going shopping

Look at Mary's shopping list. Then look at the list of items in Abdullah's store.

Mary's shopping list

1 oranges	3 flour	5 biscuits
2 eggs	4 powdered milk	6 jam

Abdullah's store

1 bread	5 Coca Cola	9 curry powder
2 salt	6 flour	10 biscuits
3 apples	7 mealie meal flour	11 powdered milk
4 tins of fish	8 sugar	12 dried beans

Work with a partner. One person be Mary and the other person be Abdullah. Make conversations like this:

Mary   Good morning. Do you have any flour?
Abdullah   Yes, I do.

or

Mary   Good morning. Do you have any jam?
Abdullah   No, I'm sorry, I don't have any.

Figure 1.2: Examples of language learning activities

to do. However, it is relatively unstructured as no input is provided so Student A is required to conceptualize the propositional content for him/herself. (2) The primary focus is obviously on meaning. (3) Student A (the speaker) has to use his/her own linguistic resources to talk about the dangerous moment while Student A is free to ask questions. (4) The language use elicited by the task corresponds to a natural communicative event, i.e. telling people about our noteworthy personal experiences. (5) The task involves oral language use. (6) The cognitive operations involved are relatively simple in that Student A can call on a ready-made schema of the dangerous moment which will provide a structure for his/her account of it. (7) The requirement that Student B draws a picture of what happened provides for a clear outcome of the task.

Activity 2, 'The same or different', is a popular language teaching activity and has also been used quite widely in research (for example, Samuda and Rounds 1993). The activity requires learners to describe their pictures with sufficient precision to enable their partners to decide whether they are holding the same or different pictures. It displays all the features of a 'task'. (1) It takes the form of a 'workplan' designed to elicit interaction between learners working in pairs. (2) The focus is primarily on meaning—describing the content of the pictures. (3) The participants choose the linguistic resources to use, i.e. there is no attempt to tell them how to describe the pictures or how to conduct the interaction, although the nature of the task may predispose them to use particular forms. (4) The activity is clearly artificial but the kind of language it elicits may correspond to that found in normal communication, for example, attempting to give clear information about something so somebody can identify it. (5) The performance of the activity entails oral language use. (6) The pictures vary in the ways in which they differ, calling on different cognitive operations. For example, the pictures in (A) differ according to which sector of the square is blacked in, whereas the pictures in (B) differ with regard to the presence or absence of a feature. (7) The participants have to state whether each pair of pictures is the same or different, which provides a definite outcome for the activity.

Activity 3, 'New students' (Madden and Reinhart 1987), entails three separate activities. The first requires students to listen to some information about four people and fill in missing information on forms. The second requires students to fill in the missing words in a short written passage. The third asks students to ask their classmates questions in order to fill in forms. The first activity satisfies the defining characteristics of a task. (1) It constitutes a workplan. (2) The focus is on meaning. (3) The learners have to make their own selection of what words to use, as opposed to being provided with, say, multiple choice answers. (4) The kind of language behaviour required is artificial but related to natural language use. (5) It is

a listening activity. (6) It involves the cognitive process of identifying specific information. (7) There is a definite outcome, i.e. the completed forms. The third activity similarly functions as a task, in this case, though, an interactive one involving speaking.

The second activity in 'New students', however, seems more like an exercise. In this case, the workplan focuses learners' attention primarily on grammatical form as most of the blanks in the text require function words like 'from' or 'is' rather than content words. Except for the words needed to fill in the blanks, the learners have no choice over the linguistic resources to be used. It is difficult to see how filling in blanks in a passage manifests 'some sort of relationship to the real world'. Finally, the only outcome is the completed passage, i.e. the outcome cannot be established separately from the language that is produced. Of course, the fact that this activity is an exercise does not denigrate its worth as a language-learning activity. Indeed, theoretical grounds can be found for including exercises alongside tasks, a teaching strategy quite widely favoured (see, for example, Estaire and Zanon's (1994) proposals for developing a task-based curriculum).

Activity 4, 'Asking for help', is an example of a cue-card activity (for example, Revell 1979). This has some of the features of a task. For example, it provides a workplan for an oral interaction and, to some extent at least, the participants are free to choose the linguistic resources, i.e. they decide how to request help, refuse, persuade, etc. Also, the resulting interaction may bear some resemblance to an authentic conversation. However, the intended primary focus is on form rather than meaning—the meanings of the utterances are given so that all the learners have to do is find the linguistic forms to encode the stated functions. Also, the only outcome is the performance of the activity itself; the oral interaction does not result in an outcome to show that the activity has been completed. This kind of cue-card activity, while of potential value for practising language, does not constitute a task.

Activity 5, 'Going shopping', is even more obviously an exercise. The workplan requires learners to attend to form—the use of 'any' and 'some' in questions and replies; it asks them only to substitute items in sentences they are given; it is not likely to lead to the kind of language use found in the real world; it is cognitively undemanding; and the outcome of the activity does not involve a definite product. However, as Johnson (1982) has shown, exercises like this can easily be made more task-like by splitting the information. Thus, if Student A had Mary's shopping list and Student B the list of items in Abdullah's store, the resulting 'gap' would require a focus on meaning. The participants could be left to choose their own linguistic resources by removing the model sentences. Finally, a definite outcome could be introduced by requesting the students to write down what items Mary was able to buy.

The discussion of these five language-learning activities, which are representative of the kinds of workplans found in teaching materials, demonstrates the essential differences between a task and an exercise. Moreover, the discussion shows that some language-teaching activities cannot easily be classified as a 'task' or an 'exercise' as they manifest features of both.[4] We have also seen that it may be possible to make an activity more task-like by making adjustments to the way it is designed.

The discussion also indicates that some of the criteria are more important for judging whether an activity is a task than others. The key criterion is (2), the need for a primary focus on meaning. As Stern (1992: 202) has pointed out, 'a task stops being communicative only if the choice of activity has been prompted by purely linguistic considerations'. Also important are (3), (4), and (7). In contrast, (1), (5), and (6) would seem to apply to all kinds of teaching materials, including exercises. The following, then, is the definition of a task that will inform this book:

> 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.

Next we will consider two general types of tasks and the difference between them.

Unfocused and focused tasks

Unfocused tasks of the kind illustrated in Figure 1.2 may predispose learners to choose from a range of forms but they are not designed with the use of a specific form in mind. In contrast, focused tasks aim to induce learners to process, receptively or productively, some particular linguistic feature, for example, a grammatical structure. Of course this processing must occur as a result of performing activities that satisfy the key criteria of a task, i.e. that language is used pragmatically to achieve some non-linguistic outcome. Therefore, the targeted feature cannot be specified in the rubric of the task. Focused tasks, then, have two aims: one is to stimulate communicative language use (as with unfocused tasks), the other is to target the use of a particular, predetermined target feature. Such tasks are of obvious use to

both researchers and teachers. Researchers often want to know whether learners are able to perform some specific feature they are investigating in a communicative context. Teachers may want to provide learners with the opportunity to practise a specific feature under real operating conditions.

There are two main ways in which a task can achieve a focus. One is to design the task in such a way that it can only be performed if learners use a particular linguistic feature. Activity 1, 'Find the picture', in Figure 1.3 is an example of such a task. This requires one learner to describe the picture indicated so that his/her partner can identify which picture it is from the same set. To achieve this, the learner has to use prepositions of place. For example, in the first set in Activity 1, the speaker will have to use the preposition 'on' to distinguish it from the other two pictures. Loschky and Bley-Vroman (1993) refer to this kind of focused task as a 'grammatical task'. However, it is not easy to design such tasks. This is because learners can always use communication strategies to get round using the targeted feature. For example, a learner who did not know or could not recall the preposition 'on' could always say, 'The ball—not in, not by the side of the box'. It is easier to force learners to process a specific feature in a comprehension task.

The second way of constructing a focused task is by making language itself the content of a task. In unfocused tasks the topics are drawn from real life or perhaps from the academic curriculum that students are studying. However, it is also possible to make a language point the topic of a task. For example, in Activity 2 in Figure 1.3 the topic is prepositions of time. Learners use the data supplied to complete a table by classifying the time phrases into those that use 'in', 'on', and 'at'. They then try to work out a rule to describe how these prepositions are used. This kind of activity, which I have called 'consciousness raising (CR) tasks' (Ellis 1991), is a task rather than an exercise because it requires learners to talk about the data together. This talk, like talk about any other topic, involves the exchange of information and ideas and is, therefore, meaning-centred. Focused tasks are discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

The design features of tasks

Irrespective of whether a task is unfocused or focused it will manifest certain design features. In this section we will examine a framework for examining these.

As Wright (1987) suggests, tasks are comprised of two principal elements: 'input data', and 'instructional questions' that invite learners to operate on the input in some way. He argues that tasks cannot be described in terms of 'output' because tasks can only have a 'discourse potential', a point I have already acknowledged by following Breen (1989) in distinguishing task-as-workplan and task-as-process, and by insisting that a task is defined as a workplan. Nunan (1989: 48) identifies three components of
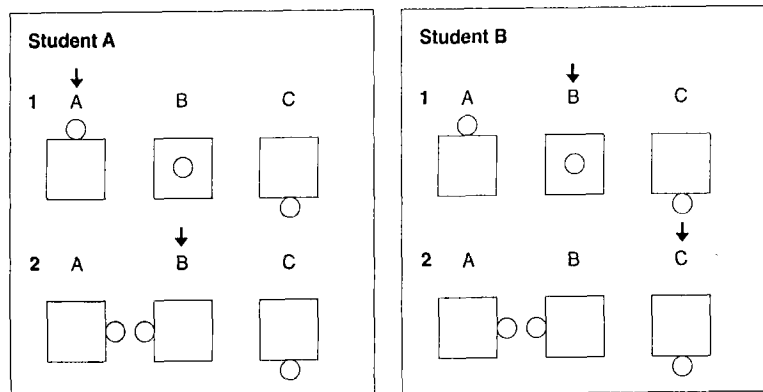
Activity 1
Find the picture

Student A
Work with a partner. Describe the picture marked with an arrow so your partner can find it.

Student B
Work with a partner. Listen to your partner. Write down the letter of the picture he/she describes. Then describe your picture marked with an arrow.

Activity 2
Prepositions of time

1 Underline the time expressions in this passage.

I made an appointment to see Mr. Bean at 3 o'clock on Tuesday 11th February to discuss my application for a job. Unfortunately, he was involved in a car accident in the morning and rang to cancel the appointment. I made another appointment to see him at 10 o'clock on Friday 21st February. However, when I got to his office, his secretary told me that his wife had died at 2 o'clock in the night and that he was not coming into the office that day. She suggested I reschedule for sometime in March. So I made a third appointment to see Mr. Bean at 1 o'clock on Monday 10th March. This time I actually got to see him. However, he informed me that they had now filled all the vacancies and suggested I contact him again in 1998. I assured him that he would not be seeing me in either this or the next century.

2 Write the time phrases into this table.

AT	IN	ON
3 o'clock		

3 Make up a rule to explain when to use 'at', 'in' and 'on' in time expressions.

Figure 1.3: Examples of focused tasks (Ellis 1998: 48)

tasks: input, activities (corresponding to Wright's instructional questions), and goals, which he defines as 'the vague general intentions behind any given learning task'.

Table 1.1 outlines the task framework that informs this book. The framework is somewhat more complex than that proposed by either Wright or Nunan. As in Nunan's framework, I include 'goal', the general purpose of the task. This can be specified in terms of what aspect(s) of communicative competence the task is intended to contribute to. Canale (1983) distinguishes four aspects: linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. Tasks can potentially contribute to the development of all four with particular tasks designed to emphasize specific aspects of communicative competence. Or the goal can be specified in terms of linguistic skills or the rhetorical mode (description, argument, directions, etc.) the task is intended to elicit.

Whereas Wright and Nunan both identify 'input' as a task component, I distinguish two separate components—'input' and 'conditions'. This reflects the need to distinguish between the kind of input data that a task provides, for example, whether it is verbal or non-verbal or both, and the way in which the data are presented, for example, whether the data are split among the task participants or shared by them. These constitute two quite distinct task variables. Thus, a task may have the same input, for example, a set of pictures telling a story, but different conditions, for example, the pictures could be seen by all the participants or they could be divided up among them. Likewise, a task could have different input, for example, a set of pictures vs. a written story, but the same condition, for example, the information was split. As we will see in subsequent chapters, input and conditions have both been found to have an effect on task performance.

'Procedures' concern the methodological options available to researchers and teachers for implementing tasks. They may or may not be mentioned in what Wright calls the 'instructional question' or Nunan the 'activity'. Consider the final task in Activity 3 in Figure 1.2. The participants are asked to interview their fellow classmates in order to fill in forms about them. Thus, the instructions do specify the procedure of working in pairs. However, there are other choices available, which are not referred to in the instructions. For example, a teacher using this task could decide to give the students time to plan the questions they would need to ask. Such procedures are independent of both the input and the conditions of the task. One of the goals of current task-based research is to investigate what effect varying the procedures for using a task has on task performance (see Chapter 4).

Finally, the framework includes the 'predicted outcomes' of a task. Neither Wright nor Nunan include this component as both consider it impossible to say what the outcome of a task will be. With respect to 'product outcomes' this is clearly not the case. As we have already seen, tasks must have clear, specifiable product outcomes in order to qualify as

tasks. Thus, the intended product outcome of the final activity in Activity 3 in Figure 1.2 is, fairly obviously, a set of completed forms. In the case of 'process outcomes', i.e. what actually transpires when participants perform a task, it is much more difficult to make predictions as the language and cognitive behaviour elicited by a task are to a considerable extent dependent on the particular participants and cannot be reliably predicted. Nevertheless, predictions can and have been made. For example, we might predict that participants performing the final task in Activity 3 will 'ask questions', although we cannot be sure whether they will produce target-like questions, for example, 'What is your name?', or employ interlanguage structures, for example, 'What your name is?'. In fact, one of the goals of task-based research is to establish what language and cognitive processes are likely to occur when input, conditions, and procedures are systematically varied. In language pedagogy, too, tasks are devised with the expectation that they will generate specific process outcomes. It would seem important, therefore, to include 'predicted outcomes' as a component in any descriptive framework.

Let us now apply this framework to the description of Activity 2 in Figure 1.2. The 'goal' of such a task might be that of 'developing the students' oral ability to describe objects precisely'. The 'input' consists of pairs of pictures, some of which are the same and some of which differ in minor details. The 'conditions' for this task involve the provision of different sets of pictures to pairs of students; the information, therefore, is split. The methodological 'procedures' involve the use of pair work. Note that this is not a necessary procedure for it would also be possible to do this task in lockstep, with the teacher holding one set of pictures and the rest of the class the other. Finally, the predicted outcomes are: (1) a written statement saying whether each pair of pictures is the same or different (the product outcome), and (2) descriptions of the pictures, probably involving the use of locative expressions such as 'at the top' or 'inside' (the process outcome).

A framework such as that in Table 1.1 has a number of uses. First, it allows for the systematic description of different tasks. Second, it provides a basis for identifying the various options for designing tasks. Third, it can assist in the identification of different task types and their classification (see Chapter 7). These uses are of importance to both researchers and teachers for without a clear idea of what a particular task consists of neither research nor teaching can be carried out efficiently.

We have now, at some length, defined what a task is and offered a framework for describing the features of different tasks. We have established the object of our enquiry. It is now time to sketch out how tasks have been employed in research and pedagogy as a preliminary for the more detailed investigation of tasks in the chapters that follow. The unifying theme of both sections is the relationship between task and language use on the one hand, and language use and language development on the other.

Design feature	Description
1 Goal	The general purpose of the task, e.g. to practise the ability to describe objects concisely; to provide an opportunity for the use of relative clauses.
2 Input	The verbal or non-verbal information supplied by the task, e.g. pictures; a map; written text.
3 Conditions	The way in which the information is presented, e.g. split vs. shared information, or the way in which it is to be used, e.g. converging vs. diverging.
4 Procedures	The methodological procedures to be followed in performing the task, e.g. group vs. pair work; planning time vs. no planning time.
5 Predicted outcomes:	
Product	The 'product' that results from completing the task, e.g. a completed table; a route drawn in on a map; a list of differences between two pictures. The predicted product can be 'open', i.e. allow for several possibilities, or 'closed', i.e. allow for only one 'correct' solution.
Process	The linguistic and cognitive processes the task is hypothesized to generate.

Table 1.1: A framework for describing tasks

Tasks in SLA research

The use of tasks in SLA has been closely linked to developments in the study of second language acquisition (SLA). In the early years of SLA (the late sixties and seventies), researchers were primarily concerned with describing how learners acquired an L2, documenting the order and sequence in which the grammar of a language was acquired (for example, Dulay and Burt 1973; Hakuta 1976; Cancino et al. 1978), and the types of oral interactions in which child and adult language learners participated (for example, Wagner-Gough 1975; Hatch 1978b). Over the years, SLA has become more theory-oriented with researchers seeking to test specific hypotheses based on theories of L2 acquisition. Tasks have played an important role in both the early descriptive research and the later more theoretically based research. Also, tasks have become a focus of research in their own right.

In early descriptive research, the main goal was to examine how learners acquired an L2 naturalistically, i.e. without formal instruction. The primary data for this research consisted of the spontaneous speech that learners used when they tried to converse in the L2. However, such data

were often difficult to collect and did not always afford examples of the particular linguistic features the researchers wished to investigate. For this reason, it was often supplemented with data collected by asking the learners to perform various kinds of tasks. These tasks were intended to elicit communicative samples of learner language, which could then be carefully analysed to plot how learners' use of specific linguistic features changed over time. For example, in a study of three classroom learners carried out between 1979 and 1982 (Ellis 1984 and 1985), I collected both samples of naturally occurring speech in the classroom and samples of speech elicited by means of 'What's Wrong Cards', where the learners talked with their teacher about a set of pictures.

The kind of instrument I used involves what Corder (1973) describes as 'clinical elicitation'. The purpose of such instruments is to collect general language data. They contrast with other kinds of instruments designed to elicit samples of language containing specific linguistic features. For example, the Bilingual Syntax Measure (BSM) (Burt, Dulay, and Hernandez 1973) was used to elicit a number of morphological features such as plural -s and regular past tense -ed. Learners were shown a series of pictures and then responded orally to questions about them. The BSM, then, serves as an early example of a focused task. However, the exercise-like nature of this task, together with the test-like way in which it is performed may result in form-focused rather than meaning-focused language use.[5] Other instruments, such as the sentence imitation test used by Cancino *et al.* (1978), are even more obviously exercises.

A question of considerable importance—and one that was soon asked— was whether the data collected by means of clinical and experimental elicitation devices were similar to or different from naturally occurring data. The study of variability in learner language tackled this question and constituted the first attempt to investigate the relationship between tasks, language use, and L2 acquisition. In this respect, Tarone's work (see Tarone 1979; 1982; 1983a) is seminal. Tarone was able to show that learners do vary in their use of language according to the type of activity they are engaged in. Adapting Labov's stylistic continuum, she argued that learners possess a continuum of styles. At one end of this continuum is the 'vernacular style', where learners attend to meaning rather than form. This is manifest in naturally occurring speech. At the other end is the 'careful style', where learners attend primarily to form. This can be tapped by means of experimental elicitation devices such as a grammaticality judgement test. In between, there is an indeterminate number of other styles which can be studied through data collected by a range of devices from tasks to test-like exercises. A number of studies carried out in the eighties testified to the variability in learners' performance of specific grammatical features depending on the kind of instrument used to collect data (for example, Beebe 1980; Ellis 1987;

Tarone and Parrish 1988). This research has contributed to our understanding of the variables that affect task performance.

Whereas variability research was directed at investigating learner production, another branch of SLA research in the eighties focused on the input to which learners were exposed and the kinds of interactions learners participated in. In this respect the work of Krashen (1981, 1985, 1994) and Long (1981, 1983a, 1996) is of particular importance. Krashen has advanced the Input Hypthesis, which claims that language acquisition is input-driven; that is, learners acquire an L2 incidentally and subconsciously when they are able to comprehend the input they are exposed to. He suggests that input becomes comprehensible when it is contextually embedded and is roughly tuned to the learners' level or proficiency. Long's Interaction Hypothesis places a similar emphasis on the role of input but claims that the 'best' input for language acquisition is that which arises when learners have the opportunity to negotiate meaning in exchanges where an initial communication problem has occurred, as in this example of an interaction between two learners:

Hiroko	A man is uh drinking c-coffee or tea with uh saucer of the uh coffee set is uh in his uh knee
Izumi	In him knee
Hiroko	uh on his knee
Izumi	Yeah
Hiroko	on *his* knee
Izumi	So sorry, on *his* knee

(Gass and Varonis 1989: 81)

In early versions of the Interaction Hypothesis (Long 1981 and 1983), Long emphasized the role that meaning negotiation of this kind played in providing comprehensible input. More recently (Long 1996), he has suggested that meaning negotiation can contribute to acquisition in other ways—through the negative feedback that learners receive by means of recasts, i.e. interlocutor reformulations of learner utterances that contain errors, and through the opportunities to reformulate their own erroneous utterances in a more target-like way. These theories have led to research that utilizes tasks to investigate which kind of input—unmodified, premodified, or interactionally modified—works best for comprehension (for example, Pica, Young, and Doughty 1987); which kind of input works best for language acquisition (for example, Doughty 1991; Ellis, Tanaka, and Yamazaki 1994; Loschky 1994); and, more recently, the effect of negative feedback on acquisition (for example, Mackey and Philp 1998; Ayoun 2001).

The Input and Interaction Hypotheses have also motivated several studies where the focus of the research was the tasks themselves. The goal of this research was to identify 'psycholinguistically motivated task characteristics' which 'can be shown to affect the nature of language produced