

Longman Handbooks for Language Teachers

A Framework for Task-Based Learning

Jane Willis



LONGMAN

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藏书章

 LONGMAN

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My greatest appreciation goes, as always, to my family, who have put up with my absences, my long week-ends of writing, and with whom I have resolved to spend far more time enjoying myself in the coming years.

Jane Willis

Introduction

The aim of communication tasks is to stimulate real communication in the target language. Many textbooks include tasks of this kind. There are also resource books full of imaginative tasks. But typically, such tasks are used at the end of a methodological cycle, rather than being central to that cycle, or are used as the basis for separate speaking skills lessons.

This book on task-based learning (TBL) shows how tasks can be used as the central focus in a supportive methodological framework. The aim of the task is to create a real purpose for language use and provide a natural context for language study. Students prepare for the task, report back after the task and then study the language that arises naturally out of the task cycle and its accompanying materials.

The framework offers a rich but comprehensible exposure to language in use, through listening and reading, and provides opportunities for both spontaneous and planned speaking and writing. It provides learners with the motivation to improve and build on whatever language they already have.

This task-based framework takes into account what we know about how people learn languages. We know, for example, that practice of language forms does not necessarily make perfect. We know that people cannot learn a language without plenty of opportunities for real language use. It is also important that the language that they are exposed to and that they use reflects the kind of language they want to learn. For example, if this includes spontaneous spoken language (which is very different from planned written language), then that is what they need to hear and study. We also know that too much emphasis on small-group communication without any call for accuracy may result in learners' grammar fossilising; some learners develop fluency at the expense of accuracy. The TBL framework is designed to resolve all these issues.

Task-based learning combines the best insights from communicative language teaching with an organised focus on language form. Although the examples in this book are based on English, TBL is valid for the teaching of any target language, second or foreign.

How to use this book

Each chapter begins with a focus page which introduces two or three of the main themes and concepts. Its aim is to help readers reflect on relevant language-learning or teaching experience which they can draw on while reading the chapter. It can also be photocopied and used on teacher-training courses to stimulate discussion of these concepts. The questions on the focus page are exploratory – there are often no set answers – but the issues they raise are important ones and will be further developed in the chapter.

Many chapters refer to the resources materials which have been gathered together in the Appendices for ease of use. These are also photocopiable.

At the end of most chapters there are suggestions for activities to help develop specific teaching skills. There are also recommendations for further reading.

I hope you and your learners enjoy working with task-based learning. I hope, too, that you gain professional satisfaction from overcoming initial difficulties (there are always some!) and seeing the difference that TBL can make in the language classroom.

Jane Willis, Birmingham, March 1996

What are your views on language learning?

Rate these statements A, B, C or D according to how far you agree with each of them. Note your reasons, and any evidence to support your decisions. Then share your views with a colleague and try to reach agreement.

A Agree strongly B Agree C Don't really agree D Disagree			
1 You can learn to speak a foreign language quite well without lessons.	<input type="checkbox"/>	6 Teachers should always correct student errors.	<input type="checkbox"/>
2 Many secondary students who have studied a foreign language leave school unable to communicate in it.	<input type="checkbox"/>	7 Reading widely is one of the best ways to learn another language.	<input type="checkbox"/>
3 Learners often go on making the same error even after being corrected many times.	<input type="checkbox"/>	8 People of all intellectual abilities can successfully learn another language.	<input type="checkbox"/>
4 If students learn the rules of grammar they are quickly able to use them.	<input type="checkbox"/>	9 The younger you are the better you will learn another language.	<input type="checkbox"/>
5 You must use the language freely to learn to speak it, even if you make a lot of errors.	<input type="checkbox"/>	10 Extroverts make better language learners.	<input type="checkbox"/>

Did You Know?

Most of the world's people speak two languages in their everyday lives.

Multilingualism is the natural way of life for hundreds of millions.

Mother-tongue speakers of English number over 300 millions.

English, Chinese and Spanish are the three most widespread languages.

Over half the world's business is conducted in English between non-native speakers.

80 per cent of the world's scientists write in English.

75 per cent of the world's mail is written in English.

Over 400 million speak English fluently as a second or foreign language.

PART A: STARTING POINTS

1

Language learning: creating the best environment

- 1.1 Beliefs about language learning
- 1.2 How learners differ
 - 1.2.1 Learning strategies
 - 1.2.2 Analytic and holistic learners
- 1.3 Four conditions for language learning
 - 1.3.1 Exposure
 - 1.3.2 Use of language
 - 1.3.3 Motivation
 - 1.3.4 Instruction
- 1.4 Classrooms as learning environments
 - 1.4.1 The power of the teacher
 - 1.4.2 The constraints on the student
 - 1.4.3 Changing the balance
- 1.5 Summary

Reflection/Observation/Further reading/Notes

This chapter provides the rationale for task-based learning. It explores how natural language learning processes can enhance learning in the classroom.

We begin with a questionnaire which focuses on concepts and issues in foreign language learning. After discussing these, and the principles behind them, we consider different individual learning styles.

We then identify three basic conditions for natural language learning which, combined ideally with a fourth, instruction, provide an optimum learning environment.

Finally we show how the teacher-centred classroom tends to have fixed interaction patterns which inhibit natural learning. This underlines the need for alternative patterns of interaction which centre on the learner rather than the teacher. We suggest that task-based learning can fulfil this need.

1.1 Beliefs about language learning

We all have strongly held beliefs about the ways that foreign or second languages are learnt – beliefs which are based on our own experience as language learners and as language teachers. It is well worth examining those beliefs, together with the experience that lies behind them. This is what the questionnaire in Focus 1 is designed to help you do.

Most teachers who do this questionnaire find they agree with six or seven statements and disagree with three or four. But your answers may well be different because they are based on different experiences.

How does this examination of our beliefs help us to understand how people learn another language? Or, more importantly perhaps, to understand why people don't learn one? We will now discuss each statement in turn.

1 You can learn to speak a foreign language quite well without lessons.

Most of us know or know of people who have learnt to speak a foreign language quite fluently without any teaching at all: people who travel and work abroad a lot; people who stay in their own country but who mix with speakers of another language. Even quite young children, who drop out of school, often classed as 'unteachable,' become unofficial tourist guides and end up managing to communicate in several foreign languages. They are not always totally accurate, but they achieve a level of language ability that is entirely adequate for their needs.

What is it that helps people like this to learn? For one thing, they are usually very motivated – they have a pressing desire to communicate and to get their meaning across. They receive a lot of exposure – they hear the language in use and pick up expressions they need. And they have many opportunities to speak and experiment with the language. Their interlocutors do not expect them to be perfect, and will often support their attempts to communicate by suggesting words and phrases.

It is, then, quite possible for people to learn a lot without having lessons. Classroom instruction is not a necessary condition for learning.

2 Many secondary students who have studied a foreign language leave school unable to communicate in it.

Unfortunately this is often the case. In language schools all over the world the largest group of students consists of people who have studied English at school but who feel they know nothing and want to start again. Many British school leavers have failed to learn French or German in much the same way. They have a small battery of formulaic phrases, but are unable or too shy to put them to use. Although many of them pass their examinations successfully, they find they cannot cope in conversation with a fluent speaker.

One reason why this happens is because much of their exposure consists of written language at sentence level: they are used to reading textbook exercises and hearing carefully-scripted dialogues. Many have been exposed to little real spoken interaction other than instruction-focused teacher talk.

We can say therefore that some people learn a language naturally without classroom instruction. On the other hand, many people do not learn one in spite of being taught.

This is not to say that classroom instruction is useless; indeed there is evidence to suggest that instruction does help. For example, learners who have had formal instruction and who then spend time in the country concerned are likely to achieve a higher degree of accuracy than those who have not had formal instruction.¹ But language lessons on their own bring no guarantee of success. Formal instruction is rarely a sufficient condition for learning a language.

What is it that prevents students learning? Most teachers would say that lack of motivation is the main problem. Learners are often keen at the beginning of their course, but in the second and third years motivation drops. Students complain they find lessons boring, and get depressed when they lose marks because they make mistakes. In large classes it is difficult to give individuals enough chance to use the language naturally. Adults feel shy about talking in front of the class. Speaking is rarely tested, and exams based on grammar often result in a lot of direct grammar teaching with focus on form rather than meaning.

There are many more reasons, too, which will come to light gradually throughout this book.

3 Learners often go on making the same error even after being corrected many times.

You don't have to sit long in any staffroom before you hear the cry: 'But I've taught them that so many times and they are still getting it wrong!' Sometimes students seem to master a grammar point successfully in a lesson, and get it right when doing an exercise on it; they even reproduce it in a test or exam. But they often fail to use it correctly when expressing themselves freely. In other words, this temporary mastery seems to happen when they are paying conscious attention to form (i.e. the surface pattern), but not when they are trying to communicate and paying attention to meaning. There is, then, a lot of evidence that practice activities, such as drilling a particular language pattern, do not necessarily 'make perfect', especially when it comes to communication.

The distinction that Stephen Krashen, an influential American linguist, made between acquisition and learning is a useful one here. Acquisition is the subconscious process that happens naturally and leads to fluency; learning being the conscious process. In a situation like the one above, you could say that students have learnt the target form, in that they can reproduce it in a controlled situation when consciously applying the rule, but that they have not yet acquired it, in that it has not become part of their internalised language system. Few people now accept Krashen's claim that formally learnt knowledge will never become part of a learner's deployable language. But until a new item has been properly acquired, it will not be freely available for use. So until then, learners are likely to continue expressing their meanings in ways which are not in accordance with the grammar of the target language.²

The proverb 'Practice makes perfect', then, does not always apply to learning grammar. And this raises another question. Should we really be aiming at perfection in our learners? If their only aim is to pass a grammar test, then some exam practice, where conscious knowledge is applied, will probably pay off. But it is most unlikely to result in fluency. In other cases, instead of aiming at the unachievable goal of perfection and falling short, might it not be more realistic and useful to spend less time on practising isolated patterns and more on helping learners to increase their vocabulary (words and phrases being generally far easier to learn) and deploy the language they have?³

4 If students learn the rules of grammar they are quickly able to use them.

This depends partly on what we mean by the word 'grammar'. There are many ways in which this word is used. We can say that children have normally acquired the basic grammar of their mother tongue by the age of four. This is grammar as an internalised system, which is acquired subconsciously, and is difficult to describe in words even for adults. In fact, it is often impossible to explain precisely what the rules are. As N S Prabhu writes: 'Developments in grammatical theory and description had shown clearly that the internal grammatical system operated subconsciously by fluent speakers was vastly more complex than was reflected by, or could be incorporated into, any grammatical syllabus...'

People who write letters to newspapers complaining about split infinitives (e.g. *I want to totally ban them* rather than *want to ban them totally*) are basing their complaints on the prescriptive grammar rules they were taught at school. Grammarians, who set out to describe how a language system works by looking at how people actually use it, write descriptive grammars which are often used for reference purposes. Pedagogic grammars aim to classify language for teaching purposes, so the rules they give are attempts to simplify and generalise. These are the kinds of rules to which the statement above refers. There are often exceptions to the rules that are given in coursebooks and pedagogic grammars, as we shall see in Chapter 7.

It also depends on what is meant by the word 'learn' (see Statement 3 above). Sometimes even rules that are easy to explain and practise take a long time to acquire and thus to become incorporated into language use. The rule that there must be an *-s* ending on the verb in the third person singular of the present simple tense in English is simple, but even advanced learners sometimes say *She work*, or overcompensate and put *-s* endings where they are not needed. In English, the form of the possessive adjectives *his* and *her* relate to the gender of the possessor. In languages where nouns have genders they usually agree with the noun. Students quickly learn this rule but continue to say things like *His husband* for some time. Other rules are conceptually more difficult, like the uses of the present perfect tense in English, and learners require a lot of exposure before they begin to use such features correctly.

Explanation of rules only helps if the learner has sufficient experience of the target language to make sense of it, in which case there may be no need for the explanation at all. Sometimes learners begin to use new language to which they have been exposed without having had any rule explained or even any practice of the pattern. They just acquire it naturally.

What is interesting is that there are many common errors that all learners tend to make, no matter what their mother tongue is. Even more interesting is the evidence that shows that all learners seem to acquire grammatical features in a similar order regardless of the sequence in which they have been taught. For example, *-ing* forms come early on, but the third person *-s* very late.

So, one thing seems quite clear – a rule will not become internalised until the learner's developing language system can accommodate it. And, for individual learners, we have no way of knowing when that might be. So once learners have learnt to recognise and pronounce the new pattern, there is little point in trying to speed up the learning process by extra practice, which is what most coursebooks seek to provide. Classroom time may be better spent in other ways: increasing exposure, (which will provide more examples of patterns that learners may recognise), expanding their repertoire of useful words and phrases and getting them to use language themselves. This is what task-based learning is all about.

5 You must use the language freely to learn to speak it, even if you make a lot of errors.

Certainly this is how you learn to speak when acquiring another language naturally. Because you are in situations where meaning is paramount, you have to try to get it across, making use of whatever words and phrases you have at your disposal. In classrooms, many speaking activities involve students in producing a given form or pattern, or expressing a given function, rather than saying what they feel or want to say.

Free use involves a far broader range of language and gives learners richer opportunities for acquiring. They need chances to say what they think or feel, and to experiment in a supportive atmosphere with using language they have heard or seen without feeling threatened. They need chances to test the hypotheses they have formed about the way language works, to try things out, to see if they are understood. They are bound to get some things wrong at first. But they will gradually get more accurate as their repertoire of language increases. A task-based learning framework aims to provide opportunities for learners to experiment, both with spoken and written language.

6 Teachers should always correct student errors.

Most teachers disagree with this. If you actually tried to correct every error, including those of stress and pronunciation, the lesson would come to a standstill and learners would become demotivated. Many students say they won't risk speaking in or out of class because they are afraid of making mistakes or being corrected in public. So when will they ever get the chance to learn by speaking freely?

When children are learning to speak their first language, parents are usually encouraging, or even ecstatic, if their child comes out with a new expression, no matter how imperfect. Parents sometimes rephrase what children say but in a very positive way. They rarely respond by saying 'That was a good try but you made two mistakes, so say it again.'

Few teachers correct students when they are doing an activity in pairs or small groups aimed at confidence building and fluency. In those situations students rarely take in a correction anyway. In the privacy of a small group, with the teacher monitoring from a distance, learners are more likely to experiment and take risks with new language if the atmosphere is supportive.

There are, however, times when students need to be accurate. Apart from the obvious requirements of examinations, learners feel the need for accuracy when they perform in public, that is, if what they say is going to be recorded, or if they are preparing an oral presentation, or a piece of writing for public display. Preparing drafts gives them a chance to check things they are not sure about, and time to work out new and better ways of expressing what they mean. So it is important that learners are challenged to be accurate at times, because this helps them to consolidate and improve their language.⁵

Ideally, the classroom should be managed so that opportunities for both kinds of language use – private and public – are available and distinct from each other. Students should know when they can use language freely without worrying about getting things wrong, and when they need to be accurate.

7 Reading widely is one of the best ways to learn another language.

Teachers often feel strongly that extensive reading does help, although students often say they don't have time! Many successful learners find that reading is an excellent way of extending vocabulary, learning new phrases and consolidating grammar.

Like extensive listening, reading provides rich exposure to language in use. Both are valuable, but reading is more controllable than listening, and allows time for reflection. You can read fast or slowly; you can go back and read things again. Good students often treat texts as learning opportunities and go back over the same pages several times, working out meanings and noting down new words and useful phrases.

Some people manage to gain an excellent reading knowledge of a language but never learn to speak it. This is usually because they either have no need or opportunity to speak, or do not hear the language used. Conversely, other people never learn to read at all, but speak quite fluently. This is often the case when languages have different alphabets and learners rely on spoken input. The most successful learners make use of all the opportunities for exposure they are offered, and reading is usually one of them.

8 People of all intellectual abilities can successfully learn another language.

Everyone is born with an innate ability to learn a language. As we saw in Focus 1, the majority of the world's people have to learn two languages just to go about their daily life. Few fail in these circumstances. It is mainly in formal instruction (where the focus is on learning about the language rather than interacting in the language) that intellectual ability (aptitude) seems to matter.

It is worth remembering that some students are less sensitive to grammatical niceties but better at memorising, while others use more cognitive strategies. Either way of learning can be successful and some learners practise both. Research shows that high-quality teaching can nullify aptitude differences.⁶ So we can hope that if we re-create natural learning conditions in the classroom, all learners will learn. This is precisely what task-based learning aims to do.

9 The younger you are the better you will learn another language.

Some experts believe that there is a 'critical period': that children who begin to learn a new language before puberty will learn better; that after puberty, it is more difficult to attain native-like fluency and pronunciation. In fact, it depends a lot on the circumstances.⁷

Adults usually learn faster to begin with because they use more cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Children have better memories and rely less on cognitive strategies. They are even less likely than adults to benefit from formal grammar teaching, though simple consciousness-raising activities designed as games or puzzles to suit their stage of cognitive development seem to help. With children, teachers often use more active methods, reflecting their ability to imitate and rote-learn and to speak without being self-conscious. Both adults and children benefit from involvement in games and problem-solving activities, but obviously of different types. Exposure and involvement are critical for all age groups.

10 Extroverts make better language learners.

Many people who write about second language learning make the point that language is intimately bound up with human behaviour and personality.⁸ Language learning, therefore, requires investment of the whole person and positive attitudes to it are important. For the teacher, this means encouraging self-esteem, which in turn gives learners the confidence to adopt beneficial risk-taking learning strategies.

Extroverts often appear to be more active learners, and more willing to take risks with language; however, introverts who are silent in class are often listening well, thinking hard and learning as much – if not more. Other personality factors also come into play: people who are tolerant of ambiguities tend to do well, while shy or anxiety-prone students may do less well and will benefit from small group or pairwork, which is less threatening.

In this section we have examined some commonly held beliefs about learning and explored evidence for those beliefs. Some is evidence we have noticed ourselves as learners or teachers, some has been noted by researchers into language acquisition. Both kinds of evidence contribute to the theories we hold about language-learning processes.

1.2 How learners differ

We now turn from examining learning processes to examining individual learners and in particular how their ways of learning can be different.

Factors such as previous learning experience, cognitive style and motivation, as well as aptitude, age and personality, which were discussed above, may all affect an individual's learning style and strategies. Motivation will be dealt with separately in 1.3.3.

Research into these factors has produced conflicting findings and generated much controversy. It has not produced much in the way of clear guidelines for teachers.⁹ Most of these factors cannot be changed by the teacher, anyway, but it is important to recognise them, and we can often rough-tune classroom activities to suit as many people as possible.

1.2.1 Learning strategies

Different types of learners adopt different strategies for learning successfully. Good learners tend to have more strategies than weak ones, and they use them more regularly.

It is generally agreed that good language learners have a strong reason for learning the language, and will:

- seek out opportunities to use the target language and make maximum use of them, focusing on communication of meaning rather than on form;
- supplement natural learning with conscious study, e.g. by keeping a notebook for new words;
- respond positively to learning situations, avoiding anxiety and inhibitions;
- be able to analyse, categorise and remember language forms and monitor errors;
- be prepared to experiment with language and be willing to take risks;
- be flexible and capable of adapting to different learning conditions.¹⁰

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) identified three main types of strategy: 'metacognitive' (e.g. organising one's learning, monitoring and evaluating one's speech, etc.); 'cognitive' (e.g. advance preparation for a class, using a dictionary, listing/categorising new words, making comparisons with other known languages, etc.) and 'social' (e.g. asking for help, interacting with native speakers, etc.).

Teachers can help by making students aware of such strategies, and encouraging their use. Previous educational experience may have resulted in learners having a very limited range of strategies. In cases such as these, students may benefit from actual training in particular strategies. Certainly encouraging students to become self-reliant will raise the quality of their classroom learning and make it easier for them to carry on learning after their course has finished.¹¹

1.2.2 Analytic and holistic learners

Learners' cognitive styles may vary, too. A distinction is often made between analytic learners who prefer a deductive approach (give them a rule and let them deduce other examples from it) and holistic learners, who prefer an inductive approach (give them examples, and let them induce the rule). However, much research on cognitive styles and second language success is, in the end, inconclusive. Indeed, it has been suggested that learners should be exposed to a variety of approaches in order to broaden their learning styles.

Task-based learning, with its holistic approach, would seem, in its purest form, to favour the styles of holistic learners. The broader framework suggested in this book tries to take all types of learners into account. Chapter 9 will give advice on helping learners who have difficulties in adapting.

No matter what strategies or styles your learners use, it is generally agreed that there are certain essential conditions to be met that are vital for all language learners. These are outlined in the next section.

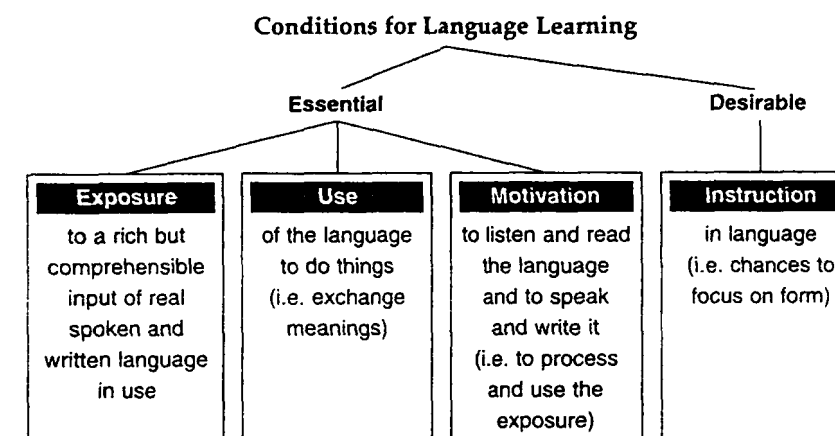
1.3 Four conditions for language learning

From now on I shall use the word 'learn' in its general sense, and not distinguish between acquiring and learning, unless otherwise stated.

The many research studies into foreign language learning have, to some extent, produced conflicting results. It is often argued that we don't yet know enough to be sure that one method is better than another. However, there are

certain basic principles that can help us select and devise useful classroom activities that are most likely to stimulate learning. So under what conditions does effective language learning take place?

Most researchers would agree that in order for anyone to learn a language with reasonable efficiency, three essential conditions must be met. These are basic enough to apply to all learners, regardless of their individual cognitive styles. There is also one additional condition that is desirable, though not essential. These conditions are summarised in the following diagram:



1.3.1 Exposure

All good language learners take full advantage of their exposure to the target language in use. This might involve listening, or reading, or both. It may be a conscious process, or largely subconscious. It involves grappling with meaning (trying to make sense of whatever they hear and read) and observing how others express the meanings that they want to be able to express. This leads on to noticing small chunks of language typically used in particular contexts, for example *It doesn't matter; I don't know; What I think is...* It involves isolating particular words and phrases, discovering what they mean and noting how they are used. It is only when such features are noticed, processed in the learner's mind and understood that they are likely to become part of their internalised language system.¹²

One important question is what sort of real language benefits learners most? For beginners, rich input such as randomly chosen radio programmes will just be noise. No matter how motivated, beginners are unlikely to be able to notice and pick out anything comprehensible, and therefore will not learn from them.

However, if learners initiate a conversation, they are likely to use strategies to adjust the input to suit their level of comprehension. For example, simply looking blank will often cause the speaker to rephrase and try again. Knowing what the topic and the purpose of the conversation are, the learner can make sensible predictions about meaning, and check anything they are not sure of having understood correctly. This modified exposure thus becomes comprehensible input and should help acquisition.¹³

If learners select a radio programme of a familiar type on a familiar topic and can guess at the kinds of meanings that are likely to be expressed, and how the

discourse will proceed, they will have a better chance of catching something they can understand and subsequently learn from. They are modifying their input by careful selection.

A similar kind of modifying can apply to reading too. By selecting a familiar genre and style of text on a familiar topic, and by reading and re-reading as we discussed in Statement 7 above, parts of the input become comprehensible. Deciphering instructions given in a foreign language is a good example of this, especially if they are relevant to some task in hand.

Teachers commonly modify their speech to suit their learners and help them understand. Repeating, rephrasing, stopping to explain a vital new word are all part of the natural co-operative communication process. Non-native teachers are generally much better at this than native speakers, because they have a greater appreciation of their learners' difficulties. Often this modification is done quite unconsciously, and it is beneficial so long as it is not carried too far.

There will, for example, be problems if everything is always said very slowly and clearly, for there are likely to be distortions of common intonation patterns, and learners will never get used to coping with natural speech. Some teachers, in their attempts to simplify, tend to address adult learners as if they were children. Other native-speaker teachers have been known to converge their speech so far towards their learners' systems that they produce ungrammatical and quite strange discourse – a kind of classroom pidgin. Obviously learners fed on a diet of impoverished input are not going to acquire anything resembling a nationally or internationally acceptable version of the target language. Neither will they be able to understand the language when they hear it used outside the classroom. So as teachers we must be aware of how we modify our classroom language.

An internationally acceptable version of the target language does not have to be a native-speaker variety. Well over half the people in the world who speak English are non-native speakers. Over half the world's business is conducted in English between people whose first language is not English.

What about the linguistic simplification of reading texts? This has been a controversial issue, and it depends very much on how the simplification is done.

There may be no overall advantage in simplifying texts. Systematic simplification removes certain features of a text, for example by rewriting complex noun groups or breaking up grammatically complex sentences into a series of two or more simple ones. Such simplification, by definition, deprives learners of the opportunity to become familiar with the original forms, which may occur frequently in the target language. Nor does simplification necessarily make the task of comprehension easier. Rewriting a complex sentence as a series of simple ones entails the omission of explicit markers like *because*, *so* and *although*. The price of grammatical simplicity, therefore, may be the obscuring of meaning. Finally there is the risk of the text becoming a distorted sample of the target language – one which learners subsequently have to unlearn.

It is essential that learners are ultimately exposed to the variety of language they will need to understand and use outside the classroom. This might be language they will need in order to study other subjects, to use at work, or for pleasure. If they need to write reports, they will need to read and study reports to find out how these are typically written. If they wish to become fluent in

informal, spontaneous conversation, they will need to experience samples of spontaneous conversation.

Some language students, especially younger learners, might not know what language they will need later. In this case it is best to select a range of materials that will give them a varied language experience, and to choose things they enjoy in order to sustain their motivation.

A final point is that in research on second language acquisition, the quality of the exposure has been found to be more important than the quantity. Quality does not just mean good pronunciation but a variety of types of language use, e.g. informal chat as well as formal monologue, and a range of different kinds of writing. In other words, exposure to a restricted diet of simplified or specially written texts, sentence-level examples and scripted dialogues is not enough. This is why the words 'rich' and 'real' appear in the diagram on page 11.

In 1.4 and 2.3 we will explore further the issue of 'quality' exposure and look more closely at the differences between classroom and non-classroom interaction and between spontaneous and planned language. In Chapters 5 and 7 we shall look at ways to select and exploit reading and listening texts.

1.3.2 Use of language

As well as input, output is now generally considered essential for language development, especially if learners wish to speak and/or write in the target language. If learners know that in class they will be expected to make real use of the target language themselves, this leads them to pay more attention to what they hear and read, and to process the input more analytically, noticing useful features of language. Thus output can encourage intake.¹⁴

Some teachers believe that real beginners need an initial silent period where they are not called upon to speak the language until they have had a certain amount of exposure to it. This gives them time to get the feel of it, and to acquire naturally, in an unpressured atmosphere, a stock of words and phrases they can then use when they do begin to speak. Some learners, however, feel frustrated by an imposed silent period and want to start speaking as soon as possible. Teachers should be sensitive, and accept but not force early contributions from their beginners (see Chapter 8).

As we discussed in Statements 5 and 6 above, learners need opportunities to communicate what they want to say and express what they feel or think. Using language for real purposes (for example to get things done, share experiences and socialise) gives learners chances to recall and use the language they know already. It is important, especially with less confident learners, to create a positive, supportive, low stress atmosphere that encourages creativity and risk-taking.

Through interaction, learners have the chance to acquire the range of discourse skills they need in order to manage their own conversations, and to control the level and kind of input they receive. These discourse skills include:

- opening and closing a conversation, i.e. introducing a topic and saying how it is relevant and 'winding down' a topic to prepare for saying good-bye and leaving;
- interacting and turn-taking, i.e. recognising possible pause points and ensuring that people will listen; even interrupting politely, to clarify or challenge what someone has said;

- organising the discourse in advance in order to sustain a longer speaking turn, e.g. *Well, I think there are two things you ought to think about. One is...*;
- reaching agreement co-operatively and shifting the topic.

Learners also need the experience of communicating in a variety of situations, for example in different size groups and for different audiences, since different linguistic strategies are appropriate in different circumstances.

There is evidence, then, that learners who are encouraged to communicate are likely to acquire a language faster and more efficiently. Teachers have also noted ample evidence that learners who are pushed or challenged to 'go public' will strive harder to improve and reach a higher level of accuracy.¹⁵

However, practice activities that are not meaning-focused, such as acting out dialogues, where the main aim is to practise specific forms and functions, have been found inadequate ways of promoting learning by themselves. All too often students do them on automatic pilot without really having to think about what they mean.

1.3.3 Motivation

The third essential condition students need is motivation to learn: motivation to process the exposure they receive, and motivation to use the target language as often as possible, in order to benefit from exposure and use.

Learners' motivation may be integrative (they may admire and identify with the target language and culture) or purely instrumental (they see the target language as a means to an end, such as further study or a good job) or it may be both. Other motivating factors include travel, seeking new friendships and simply acquiring knowledge.¹⁶

Even if language students have no personal long-term motivation, as is often the case in school, teachers can select topics and activities that serve to motivate them in the short term. If an activity can stimulate interest and involvement for, say, the next ten minutes of a lesson, students may learn something during that time.

Success and satisfaction are key factors in sustaining motivation. If students feel they have achieved something worthwhile, through their own individual effort, they are more likely to participate the next time. Hence the need for teachers to set achievable goals, and to highlight students' successes.

Early on, or when confidence is low, teachers may select simple communicative activities that students can achieve with success, for example, exchanging phone numbers in order to make a class telephone directory. Praise and encouragement will help to raise motivation. As we discussed earlier, there is no point in expecting accuracy early on, and to correct more than is absolutely necessary only undermines confidence and reduces motivation, especially when the focus is on trying to communicate.

Sometimes, though, students gain both confidence and satisfaction from activities like repeating after the tape or the teacher. In this case, spend a little time each lesson doing such activities. Children especially enjoy learning songs, poems and even dialogues by heart. Adults sometimes feel this helps them to improve their pronunciation. It may help them to notice new sounds and intonation patterns, which could raise their awareness of phonological features. Later, learners will benefit from activities presenting a higher degree of challenge, both cognitive and linguistic.

Obviously, if students can be motivated sufficiently to seek out opportunities for exposure to and use of the target language outside the classroom, so much the better. Writing to pen-friends, reading, and even playing computer games in the target language will give learners valuable language experience.

Exposure, use and motivation, then, are three essential conditions for language learning. One without the others, or even two without the third, will not be sufficient. All three can be met outside the classroom, as we saw above. Learners can learn a language quite successfully by living, working or socialising in an environment where the target language is used, simply because these three conditions naturally coincide.

However, the level of accuracy thus attained depends greatly on the uses to which such learners need to put their language. Some become almost indistinguishable from native speakers; others, however, manage to communicate but with poor syntax, simply because in their social or professional circles this level of language attainment is acceptable. Such learners are likely to fossilise and cease to improve unless they have a reason to become aware of language form.

So, we have a fourth condition: instruction, which, although not totally essential, is highly desirable.

1.3.4 Instruction

It is generally accepted that instruction which focuses on language form can both speed up the rate of language development and raise the ultimate level of the learners' attainment.

What instruction does not seem to do is change the learners' developmental sequence (see Statement 4 above). In other words, students will not necessarily learn what we teach them when we teach them. Neither does it change the order in which linguistic features begin to occur accurately in spontaneous talk, which is why students often do not appear to learn from error correction. However, given adequate exposure and the right conditions, their language systems will develop along similar lines to those of people who acquire the language naturally.

So, would one solution be to construct a syllabus that reflects the natural order of acquisition? This unfortunately presents many problems. Firstly, we do not yet know enough about it; studies are restricted to certain morphemes, like *-ing*, *-ed* and *-s* endings, and some developmental sequences involving negatives, interrogatives and relative clauses.¹⁷ But language involves far more than this and we have little idea of the order in which other features may be acquired. To restrict learners to those features we know are learnable at each stage would seriously distort the sample of language to which they were exposed. And besides, how do we know which learners are at which stage? Learners in the same class may well be at different stages in the developmental sequence, and so would not benefit from such restricted input or focus.

This last problem occurs with any lockstep approach to teaching grammar where students are expected to produce the target structure themselves. Spending twenty minutes on presenting and practising one single structure to perfection is likely to benefit only the very few learners who happen to be ready to use it. Some may know it already and it might be beyond the grasp of the rest. For these students, such practice is largely a waste of time.

The same is probably true of narrowly focused pronunciation drills. For most students, improving pronunciation is a slow organic process. They need to be aware that particular sounds exist, but not made to feel stupid if they cannot yet distinguish or produce them.

In what ways, then, can instruction help? It can certainly help students notice specific features of the target language. It can give students the opportunity to process grammatical and lexical patterns, and to form hypotheses about their use and meaning. Learners are then more likely to recognise these features occurring in the input they are exposed to. For example, once they have had their attention drawn to the use of the words *thing* and *things* in spoken phrases such as *The thing is...* they may start to notice other common phrases such as *The important thing is...* or *and things like that*. Subsequently, each time they notice a phrase with the word *thing*, they stand to gain a new insight into its use. These all become learning opportunities.

Sometimes they notice a new piece of evidence which disconfirms a hypothesis, and changes the whole picture they have of a particular form. For example, if they have learnt about the past simple, and have begun to recognise past tense verbs, they will use the past simple for everything that has happened in the past (a process that researchers refer to as overgeneralisation). Then one day, they notice verb phrases that seem also to refer to the past, but with *have/has* – the present perfect. So their former hypothesis about the past simple is disconfirmed. They now need to look out for examples of both tense forms, and examine evidence of when they are used. This leads to a restructuring of their current system to accommodate the new evidence, and drives their language development forward.

Activities aimed at promoting awareness of language form, making students conscious of particular language features and encouraging them to think about them are likely to be more beneficial in the long run than form-focused activities aimed at automating production of a single item.

If we offer learners as rich a language menu as they can cope with, we can give them plenty of opportunities to notice useful features.¹⁸ We can help them by setting consciousness-raising activities (see Chapter 7) to highlight specific aspects of language that occur naturally both in their reading and listening texts. We can give them a chance to ask about other features they notice for themselves.

During such activities, individual learners' differences can more easily be catered for, and different levels of learners can be accommodated. Setting learners to investigate specific linguistic features allows them to process them in their own time, at their own level. Phrases and words that individuals want to remember can be written down, new words can be looked up; phrases and patterns that students think might come in useful can be practised quietly. Learners will probably all be learning something different.

We find, therefore, that activities that raise learners' awareness of and make them think about language form, together with activities like planning and drafting a public presentation, are likely to be more beneficial in the long run than activities automating the production of specific patterns. Michael Long summed this up nicely by recommending a focus on form (in general) rather than a focus on forms.¹⁹ We must remember, however, that focus on form, or instruction is not an essential condition for learning.

1.4 Classrooms as learning environments

In the next section we take a closer look at a typical teacher-centred classroom environment, to see to what extent the three conditions that are essential for language learning are generally met.

This last section will reveal how the very nature of classroom interaction can easily restrict the learning opportunities open to the language learner – even though our whole teaching aim is to reproduce the essential conditions for learning, and thus to enlarge and open up those opportunities.

It describes typical features of classroom interaction showing how this differs from real-world interaction. It shows how and why teachers may need to change typical teaching routines to give learners a fairer share of the interaction with more opportunities to acquire discourse skills and to experiment with the target language themselves.

1.4.1 The power of the teacher

Which of these two exchanges is more typical of a language classroom?

Excuse me. What's the time?

Erm... Five past five.

Thanks.

Okay. Who can tell me the time? Yes? Ana.

Erm... Five past five.

Good. Five past five. Yes.

Most people immediately recognise the second as being a classroom exchange. In fact, classroom interaction is typically made up of three-part exchanges in which the teacher initiates, a student responds, and the teacher gives some feedback. And if the teacher gives no feedback, the learners take this as a negative sign and go on trying to answer until some feedback occurs.

There are many ways in which classroom interaction differs from everyday, real-life conversation. Let's start by looking at the normal roles of the teacher as exemplified by the second exchange above.

- The teacher alone has the power to nominate a topic: *Okay. Who can tell me the time?* (Imagine if a student started by saying *Okay* to the teacher!).
- The teacher controls the turn-taking, by nominating a student (*Ana*), or selecting by gesture or eye contact and saying *Yes?*
- The teacher initiates most exchanges, which may involve:
 - informing the class about something
 - directing students to do or say something
 - eliciting a response (asking a question that she normally knows the answer to – these are often called display questions)
 - checking that something has been done.
- The teacher finally evaluates the response, in this case: *Good.*

In other words, it is the teacher who controls the openings and closings of every classroom topic or activity, who controls the turn-taking, and who initiates almost every exchange.²⁰

For teachers this power is reassuring. It allows them to exert a large measure of control over the language produced by students. However, for the student trying to learn a language for the purposes of communication, it is another matter. It is true that they will get a fair amount of exposure if the teacher uses the target language for most of the lesson, but this exposure will be of a limited nature. And what opportunities will students have to use English for themselves and to acquire discourse skills such as those described in 1.3.2?

1.4.2 The constraints on the student

It is true that students occasionally ask questions to check meanings and spellings, but research based on hours of classroom recordings, even recordings of so-called conversation classes, reveals that the role of the student in teacher-led classroom interaction is generally that of responding.

Since responding is one third of the typical three-part exchange, and since all students share this one third between them, an average student in a class of 30 will get half a minute's speaking time in a 45-minute lesson. With 4 x 45 minute lessons a week for 36 weeks a year, each student will get one and a quarter hour's talking time a year. This is in fact a generous estimate; it does not allow for times in class where the teacher is in 'lecture' mode, or when students are reading, writing or listening.

If 10 minutes of every lesson is used for pair interaction (all pairs working simultaneously), this allows each learner an extra 20 minutes' speaking a week or 12 hours per year, making a total of around 13 hours. This at least is some improvement.

We also need to consider the quality of student talking time. In how many of those responding moves will students be actually communicating, i.e. saying what they think or feel? Often responding involves learners in repeating a pattern, or saying a word or phrase to show they know it. Even in pairwork, much of the talking is based on form-focused exercises or dialogues from textbooks, where students practise the target forms or display linguistic knowledge.

We see, then, that most of the opportunities for language use are taken by the teacher. Generally, learners in a teacher-led classroom get hardly any chances to manage their own conversations, exercise discourse skills, or experiment with, and put to meaningful use whatever target language they can recall.

1.4.3 Changing the balance

In task-based learning, communication tasks (where language forms are not controlled) involve learners in an entirely different mental process as they compose what they want to say, expressing what they think or feel.

Tasks remove the teacher domination, and learners get chances to open and close conversations, to interact naturally, to interrupt and challenge, to ask people to do things and to check that they have been done. Much of this will involve composing in real time. The resulting interaction is far more likely to lead to increased fluency and natural acquisition than form-focused exercises that encourage learners to get it right from the beginning.²¹

If students are to learn how to communicate efficiently, it is vital for them to have more equal opportunities for interaction in the classroom. Teachers need to find ways to relinquish much of the linguistic control and to motivate students to interact more freely and more often in the target language. Learners need more chances to use the target language with each other, not just to practise forms, but also to achieve results. These chances constitute learning opportunities. The teacher dominated initiation – response – feedback pattern needs to be used less often.

In order to meet fully the three essential conditions for learning, then, we need to create more opportunities for students to use the target language freely in the classroom, and thus to provide a more even balance of exposure and use. Carefully selected tasks will provide the stimuli for learners to take part in complete interactions and help to meet the third condition, motivation.

1.5 Summary

This chapter began by examining various beliefs about foreign and second language learning and appraising those beliefs in the light of recent research. We found out why learners often fail to learn what we teach them. We found that learning is a gradual, organic process and, given the right conditions, will happen even without a teacher.

We looked at strategies successful learners use, examined some ways in which learners differ, and suggested that they may benefit by becoming aware of a wider range of learning styles and strategies.

We said that to create an effective learning environment in the classroom, we need to meet three essential conditions: the provision of exposure to the target language; the provision of opportunities for learners to use the target language for real communication; and the provision of motivation for learners to engage in the learning process. In addition, focused instruction – drawing attention to language form – will help learners to improve more rapidly and to continue improving.

We finally reflected on the quality and type of language that learners typically meet and use inside a teacher-centred classroom. We found that the typical routine of teacher-initiated three-part exchanges offered learners an impoverished language input, and very little chance to use the target language individually other than in single responses.

This chapter illustrates some of the principles underpinning a task-based approach to language learning. It focuses on conditions in which people do and do not learn, and argues the need to depart from traditional classroom routines.

The task-based learning framework that is described in the following chapters aims to help you to manage classroom interaction so as to maximise opportunities for learners to put their limited language to genuine use, and to create a more effective learning environment.

Reflection

- 1 Look back at the questionnaire in Focus 1. In the light of what you have read and thought about in this chapter, do you now feel you would like to change any of your answers? Which and why?
- 2 What are the implications of what you have read here for your teaching situation? List three things you will try to do next time you teach a class or start with a new group. If possible, compare your list with someone else's.
- 3 If you have learnt a foreign or second language, think back to that experience. What learning strategies did you use? Which might you use now? How would you rate yourself in terms of cognitive style, motivation and aptitude?
- 4 In his book *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*, H. Douglas Brown summarises the six broad learning strategies employed by the good language learners that were studied by Naiman *et al.* (1978):
 - 1 Find a learning style that suits you.
 - 2 Involve yourself in the language-learning process.
 - 3 Develop an awareness of language both as a system and as communication.

- 4 Pay constant attention to expanding your language knowledge. Make guesses about things you do not know, check your beliefs against the language you hear and read.
- 5 Develop the L2 as a separate system. Do not relate everything to the L1.
- 6 Recognise that learning is very demanding both in effort and psychologically.

Compare the above list with the list in 1.2.1. What similarities are there? Are there any differences?

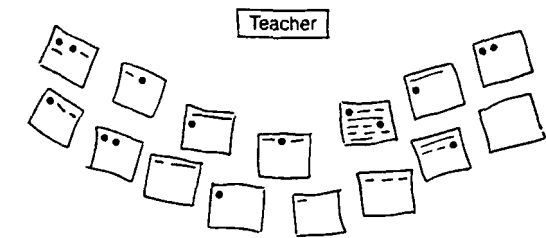
- 5 Naiman *et al.*'s 'good language learner' research is based in North America. How far do you believe it is representative of students you have taught?

Observation

- 1 Observe a lesson from the learners' point of view to calculate the balance achieved between exposure, free use of language, and instruction focused on language form. Use a three-column layout as in the example below. Write down in the appropriate column what the students are doing. Tick the activities that seem to motivate most students. Sometimes, for example in pairwork, where they are talking and listening, you will use more than one column. Make a note of the times at which students change what they are doing.

Lesson Observation		
Exposure	Use of Language	Instruction
(Ss listening/reading)	(Ss speaking/writing freely)	
10.03 T. explains what lesson is about, and what ss will be doing. Ss listen.		
10.06 T. introduces topic and class brainstorm on ideas in picture.		a few new words (class pronunciation practice)
10.14 T. writes words and phrases on board and chats about some.	10.09 Six ss, J F D R P, D, A, offer comments about picture.	Pronunciation of some of words and phrases. Ss write some down. S queries, e.g. 'Can we say...?'
10.22 T. gives final task instructions.	10.23 Ss start task in twos.	

- 2 Draw a large plan of the class, making a square for each student. Each time a student speaks, put a dot for a single word or short phrase, a short line for a longer utterance or a longer line for a sustained turn, i.e. several sentences.



- 3 Observe a lesson where the main focus is on speaking. Pick one average student and try to write down everything he/she says (without making it obvious who you are focusing on). If you observe in a group with other teachers, make sure you each choose different students. Discuss what you find out from doing this.

Further reading

For a short and well exemplified introduction to first and second language acquisition written for language teachers, containing some interesting samples of classroom data and another questionnaire to try out, read *How Languages are Learned* by P Lightbown, and N Spada, 1993, OUP.

For a fuller but extremely readable analysis of findings relevant to language teachers, with end-of-chapter vignettes on methodology and classroom applications, read *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching* by H Douglas Brown, 1994, Prentice Hall Regents.

Notes

- 1 C Doughty, 1991.
- 2 Krashen's theories are clearly summarised in P Lightbown, and N Spada, 1993, pp. 26-29 and H Douglas Brown, 1994, pp. 279-82.
- 3 P M Lightbown, 1985, pp. 173-89.
- 4 N S Prabhu, 1987, p. 17.
- 5 P Skehan, 1996.
- 6 J Carroll, 1965 as reported in D Larsen-Freeman, and M H Long, 1991, p. 207.
- 7 See P Lightbown and N Spada, 1993, pp. 11-12 and pp. 41-52 for more on the effects of age.
- 8 See H Douglas Brown, 1994.
- 9 For more discussion see P Lightbown and N Spada, 1993, Chapter 3, or H Douglas Brown, 1994, Chapter 6.
- 10 Adapted from R Ellis, 1986, pp. 122-123.
- 11 See G Ellis and B Sinclair, 1989, for more on learner training.
- 12 R W Schmidt, 1990.
- 13 D Larsen-Freeman and M H Long, 1991, pp. 134-44.
- 14 P Skehan, 1994, pp. 177-78, where he summarises work by M Swain, 1985.
- 15 P Skehan and P Foster, (in preparation).
- 16 V Cook, 1991, p. 73.
- 17 For interesting examples see P Lightbown and N Spada, 1993, pp. 57-68.
- 18 Identifying what these are would largely be the job of the syllabus designer, who would need to ensure that by the end of a course students had been alerted to a thorough and balanced coverage of useful items. But students will doubtless add items they like or need.
- 19 M Long and G Crookes, 1992.
- 20 J Sinclair and M Coulthard in M Coulthard (ed), 1992.
- 21 P Lightbown and N Spada, 1993, pp. 104-105.

From topic to task



Family surveys Find out whether your partner's family has more girls and women than boys and men. *Time: 3 min.*

Family tree Tell each other the names of your close family, and then draw a family tree for your partner's family. Finally, show it to your partner to check. *Time: 4-5 min.*

Family photos Take turns to tell the others about each person in your photo. Put all the photos away. See how much the others can remember about the people in your family. Which person in each family was remembered the best? *Time: 8-10 min.*

Next lesson - Write as much as you can remember about one of the people in someone else's photo. Do not say who they are. Ask the others to read it and identify the person.

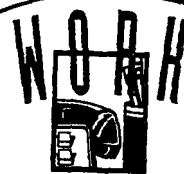
Family members How many ways of classifying these family members can you find? e.g. adults/children. Work in twos. *Time: 2-3 min.*

- father ■ baby ■ grandparents ■ aunt ■ daughter ■ mother ■ brother
- cousin ■ uncle ■ grandmother ■ parents ■ children ■ son ■ sister

Family birthdays Write the dates of four birthdays of people in your family, including yours. Now try to find someone who has the same birthday as someone in your family. Whose are the closest? *Time: 3-5 min.*



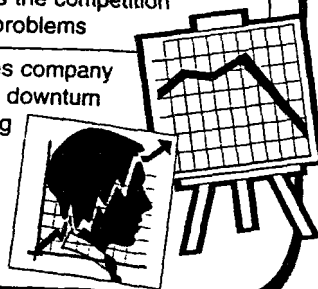
Teachers Think of a teacher you remember well. Tell your partner about him or her. Do your two teachers have anything in common? Why do you remember them? Finally, write up what you can remember about your partner's teacher for the class to read. **Subjects** What used to be your favourite and least favourite subjects at school and why? Compare your reasons for liking/not liking them.



8 Manager qualities Which are the most important qualities in a small company manager? Add four more to the list below, then rank them, starting with the most important. Justify your choice.

- normally patient ■ strict on deadlines ■ sense of humour
- listens to everyone ■ knows the competition
- helps with personal problems

9 Company in distress This task requires company data such as graphs and charts showing downturn in sales, increasing head count, escalating costs, reduced marketing budgets. Can you decide on two alternative courses of action the Managing Director might consider taking? Draft a list of recommendations for both.



Discussion Points

- (a) For each topic, say which task might be the easiest and which the most difficult. Why?
- (b) Choose any three tasks. Work out what opportunities for speaking, listening, reading and writing each could offer.
- (c) Look at the tasks on this page. How would you define the term "task"?

Aspects of tasks

2.1 Defining tasks

- 2.1.1 Goals and outcomes
- 2.1.2 Meaning before form
- 2.1.3 Tasks and skills practice

2.2 Varieties of task

- 2.2.1 Six types of task
- 2.2.2 Closed and open tasks
- 2.2.3 Starting points for tasks

2.3 Language use in tasks

- 2.3.1 Spontaneous language
- 2.3.2 Planned language
- 2.3.3 Predicting language forms

2.4 Learning from tasks

2.5 Summary

Material appraisal/Observation/Further reading/Notes

This chapter explores what we mean by tasks in task-based learning (TBL) and looks at different aspects of their use. We include an overview of task types and illustrate a range of materials tasks can be based on.

We then turn to language use in the task cycle. We identify differences between spontaneous spoken language and planned written or spoken language, arguing that learners need to recognise and practise both types. We ask how far the language of a particular task can be predicted.

Finally, we summarise the learning opportunities that TBL offers students.

2.1 Defining tasks

2.1.1 Goals and outcomes

In some books, the word 'task' has been used as a label for various activities including grammar exercises, practice activities and role plays. As I shall show in this section, these are not tasks in the sense the word is used here.

In this book tasks are always activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome.

The sample tasks in Focus 2 arise out of three different topics. Any topic can give rise to a wide variety of tasks. One job of the course designer and teacher is to select topics and tasks that will motivate learners, engage their attention, present a suitable degree of intellectual and linguistic challenge and promote their language development as efficiently as possible.

You will notice that all the tasks illustrated have a specified objective that must be achieved, often in a given time. They are 'goal-oriented'. In other words, the emphasis is on understanding and conveying meanings in order to complete the task successfully. While learners are doing tasks, they are using language in a meaningful way.

All tasks should have an outcome. For example, outcomes of some of the sample tasks in Focus 2 would be the completed family survey, the final version of the family tree and the identification of the best-remembered person in the photograph.

The outcome can be further built on at a later stage in the task cycle, for example, by extending the pairs family survey to the whole class to discover how many families are predominantly male or female.

It is the challenge of achieving the outcome that makes TBL a motivating procedure in the classroom.

An example of an activity that lacks an outcome would be to show students a picture and say *Write four sentences describing the picture. Say them to your partner.* Here, there is no communicative purpose, only the practice of language form.

It is often possible, though, to redesign an activity without an outcome so that it has one. In the above example, if the picture is shown briefly to the students then concealed, the task could be: *From memory, write four true things and two false things about the picture. Read them out to see if other pairs remember which are true.* The students would be thinking of things they could remember, (especially things that other pairs might have forgotten!) and working out how best to express them to challenge the memories of the other pairs. To achieve this outcome they would be focusing first on meaning, and then on the best ways to express that meaning linguistically.

2.1.2 Meaning before form

An important feature of TBL is that learners are free to choose whatever language forms they wish to convey what they mean, in order to fulfil, as well as they can, the task goals.

It would defeat the purpose to dictate or control the language forms that they must use. As the need arises, words and phrases acquired previously but as yet unused will often spring to mind. If the need to communicate is strongly felt, learners will find a way of getting round words or forms they do not yet know or cannot remember. If, for example, learners at a very elementary level want to express something that happened in the past, they can use the base form of the verb, and an adverb denoting past time, like *I go yesterday, Last week you say...*

The teacher can monitor from a distance, and, especially in a monolingual class, should encourage all attempts to communicate in the target language. But this is not the time for advice or correction. Learners need to feel free to experiment with language on their own, and to take risks. Fluency in communication is what counts. In later stages of the task framework accuracy does matter, but it is not so important at the task stage.

Learners need to regard their errors in a positive way, to treat them as a normal part of learning. Explain to them that it is better for them to risk getting something wrong, than not to say anything. If their message is understood, then they have been reasonably successful. If they remain silent, they are less likely to learn. All learners need to experiment and make errors.

Language then, is the vehicle for attaining task goals, but the emphasis is on meaning and communication, not on producing language forms correctly.

We will now look at two activities and evaluate them as tasks in the TBL sense.

Controlled language practice

A controlled practice activity involving repetition of target patterns is not a task, even if this is done in pairs. For example, in activities like: *Change the verb forms from present simple to past simple or In pairs, ask and answer questions using 'Do you like ...?' 'Yes, I do/No, I don't',* the emphasis is closely focused on getting students to produce the right forms. Meaning is of secondary importance.

Role plays

The term 'role play' includes a wide range of activities, some of which do have outcomes to achieve, some of which do not.

Some role plays are actually problem-solving tasks. In a business simulation based on a case study, where a team of people each take the point of view of a company employee and argue their case to solve a problem, they would genuinely be trying to convince one another. The outcome would be the solution of the problem. This counts as a task.

Similarly a shopping game, where students play the roles of shopkeepers and customers, can have an outcome. Customers must buy the things on their 'shopping lists', keeping within a set budget. Shopkeepers must try to be the first to sell out of goods, but also to make a profit. This is likely to involve bargaining sequences where students really do mean what they say, as they try to succeed in the task. Here again there is an outcome for each side to achieve.

However, there are other role plays where students are simply acting out pre-defined roles with no purpose other than to practise specified language forms. These are not tasks. While acting, students are unlikely to be meaning what they say. And if there is no outcome to achieve, they have no real reason to set themselves goals of trying to convince someone or explaining something fully. There is no challenge – they can simply avoid confronting linguistic problems and concede the argument without suffering penalties.

Recordings of classes where students are preparing and performing this kind of role play show that there is often far more real communication at the planning and rehearsal stages, especially where students with the same role are put together in groups to plan their strategies, than during the role play itself.¹

2.1.3 Tasks and skills practice

Some approaches to language teaching talk in terms of four separate skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Skills lessons are principally designed to improve one single skill and often supplement grammar teaching. Other approaches talk in terms of integrated skills. With the exception of reading or listening for pleasure, it is rare for anyone to use one skill in isolation for any length of time. If you are talking to someone you will be both observing their reactions and listening for their responses; as you listen to them, you'll be composing what you want to say next. Writing usually involves reading, checking and often revising what you have written.

Teachers following a task-based cycle naturally foster combinations of skills depending upon the task. The skills form an integral part of the process of achieving the task goals; they are not being practised singly, in a vacuum.