

牛津应用语言学丛书



# Task-based Language Learning and Teaching 任务型语言教与学

Rod Ellis

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**Task-based  
Language Learning  
and Teaching**

**任务型语言教与学**

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# **Task-based Language Learning and Teaching**

Rod Ellis

## 出版说明

本世纪初，外教社先后引进“牛津应用语言学丛书”（19种）和“牛津应用语言学丛书（续编）”（10种）。这些图书由于内容权威、选择精当而受到了外语界的好评，在科研论文中被广泛引用，对推动我国外语教学和研究的发展起到了重大作用。

近年来，随着研究的不断扩展和深入，国内学界对研究资料有了新的需求，像“任务型教学法”、“英语作为国际通用语”、“二语习得的跨学科研究”等逐渐成为了热门的话题。有鉴于此，我们又从牛津大学出版社出版的应用语言学图书中精选了10本，以更好地满足广大教师和科研人员的需求。希望这次出版的这10本图书，能够和以前的29本一起，反映出国际应用语言学重要领域研究的前沿，为全面、深入推动我国外语科研起到新的作用，做出新的贡献。

# Acknowledgements

There have been many inputs into the writing of this book. I am grateful to Martin Bygate for inviting me to participate in a series of colloquiums on task-based learning at the American Association of Applied Linguistics and the Annual TESOL Convention as these first gave me the idea for a book that would bring together the various perspectives on tasks. I am indebted to the comments provided by various readers of the first draft. Four of these were anonymous, chosen by the Press, but I could guess who two of them were. Henry Widdowson read a number of chapters with his usual critical acumen. Three other reviewers kindly accepted my invitation to read specific chapters. Merrill Swain commented in detail on Chapters 4, 5, and 6 and then engaged in an e-mail exchange that helped me to understand sociocultural theory more deeply. Cathie Elder read Chapter 9 and enabled me to avoid a number of faux pas, which as a non-member of the language testing community I would have otherwise made. Mike Rost read Chapter 10 and helped me shape its purpose more clearly. I have responded to most of the comments provided by these reviewers, sometimes revising chapters quite extensively in the light of their suggestions. Thus, to use a fashionable term, this book is a co-construction, although, of course, I alone accept the responsibility for its failings.

I am also indebted to the University of Auckland for the sabbatical leave that made it possible to finish the book, to Showa Women's University in Tokyo for the large and peaceful office where the final writing took place and, above all, to my wife and children for their patience with my absences from them.

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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 (SLA) research. '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.

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# 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

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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

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### 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.'

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*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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> '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.<sup>3</sup> 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