

*Task-based Language Acquisition**

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Abstract

The disenchantment with the structural syllabuses instigated both the language teachers and applied linguists to come up with other more potent ways of promoting language learning and teaching. One of the manifestations of this long-cherished inclination was communicative trend towards language acquisition. To that end, tasks are one of the implementational means and realizational tools of achieving fluent communication. In recent years task-based language learning and teaching has gained momentum and been widely endorsed because of its influential effect on fostering language acquisition and application. The impetus to task-based tendency originally emanated from Input Hypothesis (Krashen 1981), Interaction Hypothesis (Long 1981), and the sociocultural view of Vygotsky (1978). The first classroom adoption of task-based approach was realized by Prabhu's (1987) procedural syllabus. His Communicational Teaching Project which was for the first time performed in secondary schools in India was profoundly task-based. Indeed, task-based teaching is deeply concerned with catering for the learners' cognitive and affective domains. It seeks to promote learners' communicative, discorsal, linguistic, strategic, and socio-cultural competence through natural, authentic, genuine, and creative activities (Moskowitz 1977). The foremost aspiration of task-based teaching is to motivate acquisition via meaning-focused and some form-focused activities (Ellis 2004). This paper endeavours to delineate the manifold dimensions of task-based teaching and learning.

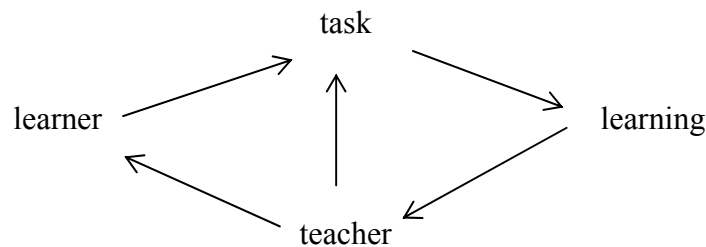
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Introduction

Task-based teaching strives to involve learners in multifarious types of activities which paves the way for meaningful acquisition. Loschky and Bley-Vroman (1993) believe that the success of tasks hinges on the learners' stages of development. Tasks, in fact, play a mediating role in the learning process:



Therefore, it is evident that the kind of tasks that are used and the methodology (Skehan 1996a) that the teacher enacts in the implementation phase are of supreme importance. The selection of appropriate tasks and the sequencing of them for their complexity and, then, the procedures that are used to put them into action are vital in acquisition process (Nunan 1989).

What is a task?

There are several definitions of tasks. From the pedagogical point of view tasks are activities that learners perform in the classroom. The crucial point is that the tasks should instigate acquisition. That is, they should focus the learner's attention on meaningful and authentic types of communication that might be encountered outside the classroom in the real world. Bygate, Skehan, and Swain (2001) put it in this way:

A task is an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective.

The learners should make use of whatever at their disposal to reach an outcome. The tasks should stimulate fluency and accuracy at the same time. They could be oral or written and they could be of various discursal mode such as description, exposition, narration, etc.

The main concern, however, in designing the tasks is the purpose for which they are used. Every task has a definite reason behind it, i.e., they could be devised for various types of tastes in order to elicit the learner's communicative act. Crookes (1986) defines tasks as follows:

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.

Generally, the tasks should motivate enough interaction among the learners and consequently induce acquisition. The chief disseminator of *interaction hypothesis* to data is Long (1981), who believes that interaction ultimately promotes language learning. The more collaborative talk and activity among the learners, the greater they would acquire language unconsciously. So, interaction provokes production, and this *pushed output* (Swain 1985) motivates the learners to unveil what they have already learned. This type of *uptake* (Allwright 1984) that learners exhibit in the classroom as the result of learning gives testimony to their code-based competence. Skehan (1998b) contends that we possess two types of linguistic knowledge: the *exemplar-based knowledge* includes the ready made words and expressions we use unconsciously everyday (e.g., "you know", "as a matter of fact", etc.) and the *rule-based knowledge* includes novel sentences that we construct during speaking and writing.

Therefore, the tasks should tap not only the exemplar-based but also the rule-based system of learners. To that end, production stimulates learners to automatize their discursal and linguistic grasps.

Nonetheless, the task designers and the instructors alike should be vigilant that the tasks may not forfeit their taskness. That is, if the tasks cease to be meaningful and pragmatically-oriented, then, they would turn into *situational grammar exercises*. These exercises are, in fact, form-focused (Ellis 2004) and semantically-oriented. Some of the disparities between tasks and exercises are the following ones:

| Exercises | Tasks |
|-----------------------|----------------------|
| form-focused | meaning-focused |
| semantic meaning | pragmatic meaning |
| contextless language | language in context |
| intentional learning | incidental learning |
| declarative knowledge | procedural knowledge |
| language as an object | language as a tool |

It is important to note that the above mentioned distinctions are not totally either exercises or tasks. All the activities are developed for some purpose – but there is a continuum of specificity from exercise-based activity to tasked-based activity, and a given activity may fall at any point on the continuum.

In spite of the fact that there should always be focus-on-meaning activities, the focus-on-form activities must not be renounced. In language acquisition form and meaning are somehow interwoven. Willis (1996) argues that there should be an explicit focus on language at some points in a task cycle. Hence sometimes in negotiation for meaning an implicit focus on form hastens language knowledge. It can be reckoned that explicit knowledge can be converted into implicit knowledge, the *interface position*, adopted by Sharwood Simth (1981) and Dekeyser (1998). However, Krashen (1981), Zobl (1995), and Hulstijn (2002) argue against it and assert that explicit knowledge

does not transfer to implicit knowledge, the *non-interface position*. In between, Ellis (1994a) puts forward a *weak-interface position* in which explicit knowledge eases the expansion of implicit knowledge instead of converting into it.

Subsequently, tasks are deemed to be quintessential means for realizing a focus on form. So in the process of building for meaning, learners' attention could be drawn on linguistic forms. Schmidt (1990) calls this as *noticing hypothesis*. Ellis (2004) believes that if the learners do not pay due attention to form their interlanguage may harden and consequently fossilization set in.

So, some learners may make use of their *strategic competence* (Canale 1983) to compensate for breakdowns in communication. Thus, tasks have proved to be a great asset in bringing about a focus on content and inducing a focus on form accordingly.

Selection and gradation of tasks

Generally, in structural syllabuses the content of the course is pre-specified according to the linguistic elements which have been dubbed as *synthetic* (Wilkins 1976) and *Type A* (White 1988) syllabuses. However, Prabhu (1987) noted that the preselection of linguistic items should be supplanted by holistic units for communication, i.e., tasks. The chosen tasks should be stimulating and motivate negotiation among the learners. They must provide the learners with ample comprehensible input and feedback. Sometimes the learners could help the teacher select some tasks, as Wilberg (1987) notes that the content is dictated by the student, the form only by the teacher.

However, the main issue is that the selected syllabus should harmonize with the learners' *built-in* (Corder 1981) syllabus. That is,

they should be in accordance with the learners' level of proficiency and level of development. The tasks should possess the communicative effectiveness, i.e., the students should participate in the negotiation of meaning which in turn induces acquisition.

In order to design a task-based syllabus, Ellis (2004) proposes four points:

- 1) the course goals (general or special English);
- 2) task types and their themes;
- 3) the nature of the tasks;
- 4) task sequence.

It can be argued that the goals are varied, for example, the learners' goals, the instructor's goals, the sponsors' goals, and so on. On the whole, the themes and/or topics that are selected should be compatible with the learners' proficiency level. The themes should be suitable, stimulating and involving, and encourage every single student to take part in communicative activity. The selected topics should be familiar, relevant, and natural not only for beginner learners but also for advanced learners.

In selecting and grading the tasks the *learners' needs* (Nunan 1989) should be taken into consideration. The tasks that are implemented in the classroom should be similar to the real world ones. Perhaps one of the apt ways of teaching linguistic forms is through the content-based courses (Widdowson 1979). It is believed that learners could acquire language best while they are engaged in learning subject content.

In short, the course designer or instructor had better determine the tasks in terms of the learners' level of proficiency, then work out

their thematic content, next to sequence them and finally grade them according to their difficulty levels.

Types of task-based activities

All in all, there are various types of tasks. They have usually been designed for a variety of reasons. Loschky and Bley-Vroman (1993) are at pains to stress that teachers should design tasks that make the target structure more essential, natural, or useful. Sterlacci (1996) postulates that it is likely to construct tasks that can aim at certain grammatical points. Donato (2000) claims that tasks are not 'generalizable' so that they cannot be classified because different learners interpret the same task differently. And it is possible that the activity that ensues out of a task may differ from student to student. However, this does not abstain us from calling attention to several types of tasks that have been advanced around the globe thus far (Ellis 2004):

One-way tasks: These are tasks that are held by one person (e.g., listen-and-do-tasks). *Two-way tasks*: These are tasks that are done by two or more people.

Interaction/reciprocal tasks: These tasks necessitate that the information be exchanged between two interlocutors. *Non-interactive/non-reciprocal tasks*: In these type of tasks the learners do not have any chance of direct interaction (e.g., academic listening tasks).

Open tasks: These are tasks that there is not a single answer or solution to them. The students feel free to make choices (e.g., debates, discussions, surveys). *Close tasks*: In these type of tasks there is usually a single answer or solution to the problem (e.g., Are these two pictures same or different?).

Divergent tasks: In this type of task the learners hold different viewpoints and have to discuss with each other and justify their outlook (Duff 1986). *Convergent tasks*: In this type of task students have to come into agreement with each other.

Jigsaw tasks: These tasks are hybrid in nature. They comprise two or more activities simultaneously.

Collaborative dialogue (i.e. instructional conversation): These are conversations that are held between the teacher and the learners, in which new structural points are introduced and practiced in the classroom (Swain 2000a).

Cognitive tasks: These types of tasks include three kinds: 1) *Information-gap activity*: In these tasks information are transferred from one person to another; 2) *Reasoning-gap activity*: These are tasks in which information are derived from some sources through inferencing, deducting, and reasoning; and 3) *Opinion-gap activity*: These are tasks in which the learners express their preferences, feelings, or attitudes (Prabhu 1987).

Rhetorical tasks: These tasks are based on various schemes of rhetoric which differentiate discourse fields (e.g., narrations, instructions, descriptions, etc.).

Consciousness-raising tasks: These are tasks that attempt to focus the learners' attention on some linguistic features.

Focused tasks (i.e. focus-on-form): In these tasks the learners are intentionally made aware of some important grammatical constructs.

Unfocused tasks: In these tasks the learners are motivated to perform communicative language use.

Target tasks: These are similar to real-world activities that learners perform in the classroom. *Pedagogic tasks*: These are the language skills (reading, speaking, listening, and writing) and the linguistic system (vocabulary and grammar) which are performed so

that the learner later would be able to cope with real world tasks (Long 1989).

It can be assumed that different types of tasks could in one way or the other contribute to language acquisition. The main point to bear in mind is that the activities should be meaning-focused and the learners must be oriented towards the negotiation of meaning.

Task complexity

In a syllabus the tasks should be sequenced at a pace in which they match the learners' developmental level. This necessitates that the complexity of every task be determined before the course commencement. There are a lot of factors (learner factors and task factors) that contribute to the difficulty or ease of a task.

Learner factors:

1) Proficiency level: The learners' proficiency level is important in performing a task (Robinson 2001).

2) Motive: The learners' motives play a crucial role in their approach to a task (Ellis 2004).

3) Background knowledge: The learners' prior knowledge is important in performing a task (Chang 1999).

4) Topic familiarity: The learners will perform a task easily if the topic sounds familiar to them (Gass and Varonis 1984).

Task factors:

1) Clear structure: The tasks that have clear structure are easy to do but the tasks that have complex structures pose enormous cognitive demand on the learners.

2) Nature of activity: The nature of activity that results from a task can have a considerable influence on task performance.

3) Context: The context-reduced (i.e. context-free) tasks are more demanding and burdensome than context-embedded tasks (Cummins 1983).

4) Task design: The tasks that require several stages of activity are more difficult than the tasks that can be performed in a single step.

5) Number of features: The number of features that are required to be manipulated by the learners affects the complexity of a task (Brown 2000).

6) Cognitive operations: The mental operations that are needed to complete a task have a tremendous impact on task complexity (Ellis 2004).

7) Precision: The more precision that a task requires for its completion, the more arduous it will be (Prabhu 1987).

It goes without saying that the course designers or instructors should be careful in designing and/or selecting tasks. The different types of learners obviously require different levels of tasks. The beginner learners should be provided with more context-embedded, pictorial, and close-referenced (here-and-now) tasks. However, the advanced level learners could be offered more context-free, cognitively demanding, and distant-referenced (there-and-then) tasks (Crookes & Gass 1993a).

Task implementation

In addition to determining the type of tasks (selection) and the sequence in which the learners will carry them out (gradation), appropriate decisions must be made concerning the methodological procedures for teaching these tasks. In order to perform a task properly, Wendel (1997) offers two types of planning: (1) *off-line*

planning: before the learners could carry a task out, they are given time in order to plan how to deal with a task reasonably, and (2) *online planning*: learners can plan how to perform a task while actually they are engaged in doing it. So, learners could be encouraged to perform more accurately and fluently if they are given ample time prior to and during the performance of a task.

Several lesson designs have been proposed in order to ease the process of teaching and consequently learning the tasks. Estaire and Zanon (1994), Willis (1996), and Lee (2000) are in agreement about the following three basic phases:

1) *Pre-task*: In this phase, the learners are taught the new vocabulary, do a similar task, plan the ways of dealing with the task, reflect on the task, take risks, and so on.

2) *During task*: In this phase, the learners attempt to perform the tasks with a set time; the teacher decides whether the task should be done individually, in pairs, or in a whole group.

3) *Post-task*: In this phase, the learners report what they have done and how; they repeat the task in order to learn it better, they reflect on the process of performance, and they try to focus on some forms which were difficult for them. Here the teacher might indicate the learners' errors by writing them on the board and inviting the student to correct them.

To introduce and work with the tasks, Ellis (2004) advocates two modules for a task-based lesson design: (1) in *communicative module* the learners are engaged in unfocused tasks. Most of the activities are message-centered and the learners learn the grammatical features incidentally. (2) In the *code-based module* the grammatical structures are introduced and practised intentionally and explicitly.

The focus is more on forms. It is reasoned that the first stages of a course are better to be devoted to communicative activities and then the linguistic codes to be presented through consciousness-raising tasks, etc.

Typically, one of the crucial points in teaching tasks is *metatalk*, that is, conscious talk about the language. Swain and Lapkin (2001b) assert that metatalk enables learners to acquire the language more deeply. By debating about the features of a task and the process of performing the tasks, the learners achieve an in-depth understanding about the linguistic forms. From the sociocultural point of view Vygotsky (1978) posits that metatalk regulates the thinking process and because of this learners are assisted and thus learning is enhanced.

Sometimes the teacher should necessarily explain a grammatical point explicitly because the learners have difficulty in internalizing it implicitly. For example, when the learners are not sure if the word *hard* is used as an adjective or an adverb the teacher can simply explain the rule: 'Hard can be used as an adjective or an adverb' (Swan 1982).

Classroom participation

The classroom interaction could take place in several forms: individually, in pairs, in small groups, and the whole class. Some tasks (e.g., reading and writing) require individual work but others (e.g., reciprocal tasks: reaching an agreement) need to be done by the whole class. When learners join in collaborative activities their production and consequently their internalization are augmented.

The tasks usually act as a tool for enriching language acquisition, so the more interaction in the classroom the better the learning will take place. Task-based classrooms are not teacher-centered rather they are learner-centered. For example, a learner could be elected to teach the class, of course, in advanced level courses – peer teaching (Carpenter 1996). The merits of group activity may include the following ones: anxiety and stress are reduced; motivation, enjoyment, feedback, social interaction, and independence are increased (Jacobs 1998).

Conclusion

Generally, task-based courses can be designed in such a way which may induce cognitive changes in the learners, and hence aid the language acquisition processes. The main point is that sometimes adopting a completely task-based language teaching may not be feasible during a course of instruction. The reasons for this are rather varied: the administrative limitation, availability of facilities, teachers lack of complete mastery of language, etc. However, the teachers could opt for a *task-supported* language teaching, i.e., they can use some tasks alongside the dictated administrative material and their own existing techniques and methods of teaching.

The crucial issue anyway to bear in mind is that there should be more repetition, practice, time-on-task, contextual support, highlighting salient structures, giving learners opportunity to negotiate meaning and focus on form, encouraging learners to take risks, asking them to evaluate their own learning, and so on.

Fortunately, tasks can be put to use in a variety of ways. They can be used as a means to instigate communication. They can be

employed to evaluate the learners grasp of linguistic knowledge. They can also be utilized to evaluate an entire course of instruction (Weir and Roberts, 1994). Therefore, the tasks should be genuine, natural, authentic, learner- friendly, and practicable.

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