

## **Lecture 8: The Task-based Approach (1980s)**

### **Introduction**

Although tasks can be traced back to vocational training programmes that took place in USA in the 1950s, they gained much interest in the mid-1980s as a research tool to explore Second Language Acquisition (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) relies on the use of tasks as the principal component of instruction in language teaching. The aim behind Task-based Instruction (TBI) was “to elicit language production, interaction, negotiation of meaning, processing of input and focus on form, all of which are believed to foster second language acquisition” (Van den Branden, 2006, p. 3). It is defined as “an approach to language education in which students are given functional tasks that invite them to focus primarily on meaning exchange and to use language for real-world, non-linguistic purposes” (Van den Branden, 2006). TBI focused on the process rather than the final product. Some of its proponents (e.g., Willis, 1996) presented it as a logical development of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) since the Task-based Approach has not rejected CLT modes of thought, but incorporated them into its framework. TBI is usually considered as an approach, rather than a method. According to Leaver and Willis, “TBI is not monolithic; it does not constitute one single methodology. It is a multifaced approach, which can be used creatively with different syllabus types and for different purposes” (2004, p. 3).

### **1. Definition of a Task**

The following are the most common definitions of a task, ordered chronologically:

1-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, making a hotel reservation, writing a cheque, finding a street destination and helping someone across a road. In other words, by ‘task’ is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play and in between. (Long, 1985, p. 89)

2-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, was regarded as a “task” (Prabhu, 1987, p. 24).

3-any structured language learning endeavour which has a particular objective, appropriate content, a specified working procedure, and a range of outcomes for those who undertake the task. ‘Task’ is therefore assumed to refer to a range of workplans which have the overall purposes of facilitating language learning – from the simple and brief exercise type, to more complex and lengthy activities such as group problem-solving or simulations and decision-making. (Breen, 1987, p. 22)

4-“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, 1989, p. 187). Breen distinguished between ‘a simple and brief practice exercise’ and “more complex and comprehensive workplans which require spontaneous communication of meaning or the solving of problems in learning and communicating” (Breen, 1989, p. 187).

5-one of a set of differentiated, sequenceable, problem posing activities involving learners and teachers in some joint selection from a range of varied cognitive and communicative procedures applied to existing and new knowledge in the collective exploration and pursuance of foreseen or emergent goals within a social milieu. (Candlin, 1987, p. 10)

6-the 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. (Nunan, 1989, p. 10)

7-a workplan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome...it requires them to give primary attention to meaning and to make use of their own linguistic resources, although the design of the task may predispose them to choose particular forms. A task is intended to result in language use that bears a resemblance, direct or indirect, to the way language is used in the real world. Like other language activities, a task can engage productive or receptive, and oral or written skills and also various cognitive processes. (Ellis, 2003, p. 16)

8-“an activity in which a person engages in order to attain an objective, and which necessitates the use of language” (Van den Branden, 2006, p. 4).

In short, a task is an activity that necessitates language use to achieve a specific goal. Richards and Rodgers (2014, p. 177) provided different examples of tasks: finding a solution to a puzzle, reading a map and giving directions, making a telephone call, writing a letter, or reading a set of instructions and assembling a toy.

## **2. Types of Tasks**

**2.1. Real-world tasks or target tasks:** refer to uses of language in the world beyond the classroom. They are important and useful in the real world. This would be the case with courses for learners who have clearly identifiable needs; e.g. using the phone.

**2.2. Pedagogical tasks:** are those that occur in the classroom. They have a psycholinguistic basis in SLA theory and research but do not necessarily reflect real-world tasks. This would be the case for learners who do not have clearly identifiable needs, such as with young learners; e.g. information-gap activities (Nunan, 1989).

## **3. Theoretical Views about Language**

Several assumptions about the nature of language can be said to underlie current approaches to TBLT:

- Language is primarily a means of making meaning.
- Language is a means of achieving real-world goals.
- Lexical units are central in language use and language learning.
- Spoken interaction is the central focus of language and the keystone of language acquisition.
- Language use involves integration of skills. (Richards & Rodgers, 2014, pp. 179-180)

## **4. Theory of Language Learning**

TBLT shares the general assumptions about language learning underlying Communicative Language Teaching; however, it focuses on Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory, and mainly the cognitive perspective:

1-Language learning is determined by learner internal, rather than external, factors. Learning is promoted by activating internal acquisition processes. It is determined by internal mental processes. Hence, meaning needs to be constructed by the learner.

2-Language learning develops gradually and learners pass through several stages as they restructure their language system (interlanguage) over time.

3-A focus on form can facilitate language learning. Grammar is not taught as an isolated feature of language but as it arises from, its role in meaningful communication.

4-Negotiation of meaning provides learners with opportunities for provision of comprehensible input and modified output. This draws on an interactional view of learning.

5-Tasks provide opportunities for learners to “notice the gap” in their linguistic repertoire. Schmidt (1990) proposed that for learners to acquire new forms from input (language they hear), it is necessary for them to notice such forms in the input (the noticing hypothesis).

6-Interaction and communication through tasks provides opportunities for scaffolded learning. The social activities in which the learner participates support learning through a process in which a knower guides and supports the learning of the other, providing a kind of scaffold or mediation.

7-Task activity and achievement are motivational.

8-Learning difficulty can be negotiated and fine-tuned for particular pedagogical purposes. (Richards & Rodgers, 2014, pp. 180-181)

## **5. Characteristics of a Task**

1-Meaning is primary.

2-Learners are not given other people's meaning to regurgitate.

3-There is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities.

4-Task completion has some priority.

5-The assessment of the task is in terms of outcome. (Skehan, 1998)

## **6. Characteristics of Task-based Instruction (TBI)**

1-The focus is on process rather than product.

2-Basic elements are purposeful activities and tasks that emphasize communication and meaning.

3-Learners learn language by interacting communicatively and purposefully while engaged in the activities and tasks.

4-Activities and tasks can be either: those that learners might need to achieve in real life; those that have a pedagogical purpose specific to the classroom.

5-Activities and tasks of a task-based syllabus are sequenced according to difficulty.

6-The difficulty of a task depends on a range of factors including the previous experience of the learner, the complexity of the task, the language required to undertake the task, and the degree of support available. (Feez, 1998, p. 17)

Nunan (2004) suggested six principles for TBI, which constitute the basic tenets of the approach:

1-The content is chosen based on the learners' needs.

2-Communication is done through using the target language for interaction.

3-Authentic materials are included in learning.

4-Giving learners opportunities to focus on what and how they learn.

5-Valuing learners' experiences as significant factors in learning.

6-Connecting language learning in classrooms with the authentic everyday use of language. (p. 1)

## **7. Developing Classroom Tasks**

1. Conduct a needs analysis of real-world tasks to obtain an inventory of target tasks.

2. Classify the target tasks into task types.

3. From the task types, derive pedagogical tasks.

4. Select and sequence the pedagogical tasks to form a task syllabus.

## **8. Procedures of Task-based Instruction (TBI)**

Willis (1996) provided a useful outline of task-based learning which has three main components: pre-task, task-cycle and language focus.

**1. The pre-task:** the teacher sets up the task.

**2. The task cycle:** it includes three elements:

**A. Task:** the students carry out the task in pairs with the teacher monitoring.

**B. Planning:** the students decide how to report back to the whole group.

**C. Report:** the students make their reports.

**3. Language focus:** it includes two elements:

**A. Analysis:** students discuss how others carried out the task on a recording.

**B. Practice:** the teacher practices new language that has cropped up.

For example, the teacher might present an advertisement for translation (pre-task) and set the students the specific task of translating parts of it in pairs (task). They decide how to present it to the group (planning), then compare notes on it with other groups (report), possibly by using networked word-processing. Then the students compare their advertisement with real advertisements (analysis) and they practise new language that has come up (practice).

## **9. Learners' and Teachers' Roles**

The learner acts as group participant (pairs or small groups), monitor (by paying attention to both meaning and form during the activity); in addition to risk-taker since many tasks will require learners to create and interpret messages for which they lack full linguistic resources and prior experience. On the other hand, the teachers' main roles are motivator, organiser, and supporter. Other task-specific roles include:

-selector and sequencer of tasks.

-preparing learners for tasks.

-consciousness-raising

-monitor. (Richards & Rodgers, 2014, pp. 187-188)

## **10. Instructional Materials in Task-based Instruction**

Different task-based materials are used, such as realia/authentic materials like newspapers, television, Internet sources, and technology (Richards & Rodgers, 2014, p. 189).

## **11. Criticism of Task-based Instruction**

Seedhouse (as cited in Harmer, 1988, p. 73) criticised the applicability of TBI, he argued that it may be possible to base some learning on tasks, but it would be difficult to base the whole

pedagogical methodology on them. Furthermore, Willis and Willis (2007, p. 200) highlighted the following disadvantages:

- 1-Most books do not use TBL, so there will be a need to find timing to design tasks.
- 2-Lack of timing to integrate TBL into existing syllabi.
- 3-Teacher may be confused about how to teach in TBL if they are not used to it.
- 4-Some learners ask for concrete outcomes such as grammatical rules.
- 5-Learners may not be motivated enough to take TBL seriously.
- 6-Given that the approach uses ‘real’ tasks, it is not suitable for low-level students.
- 7-Overwhelming use of L2 for learners during the different phases of TBL.
- 8-Student feel no sense of progress; the outcomes of learning are not clear.
- 9-Challenging for teachers (and learners) because there is no control over language.
- 10-There is a gap between TBL and existing exam systems—exams are not based on tasks.

## **Conclusion**

It is the dependence on tasks as the primary source of pedagogical input in teaching and the absence of a systematic grammatical or other type of syllabus that characterize current versions of TBLT, and that distinguish it from the use of tasks in Competency-Based Approach.

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