English Through Fun

B. Dadvand (babak.dadvand@gmail.com)
H. Azimi (azimi.ho@gmil.com)*
Ph. D. Students in Teaching English as a Foreign
Language (TEFL), Tarbiate Modares University

The Note

We are back on board with our fellow colleagues and pedagogues again. Before you flip through the pages of ETFun, let's once more express our gratitude for all the support and encouragement you bestowed us with.

Lately, we have received very interesting comments and suggestions from our readers. Of all the emails delivered to us (here we go again: etfun@roshdmag.ac.ir) one caught our attention immediately: to further the Q & A section into a larger forum, maybe two separate pages, so that we can talk about our academic/professional concerns more uninhibitedly. There you can raise any question or share with others any idea or question on any issue relating to your pedagogical practices. You want to know more about where this idea came from, check out this edition's Q & A.

Can you also keep secrets!!?? Ok, then! We are also thinking about an **on-line discussion group** where all teachers can interact with each other via email. Please keep this hush-hush for the time being!!! We'll let you know about its details in the next edition.

Good luck till then.

cooperative, productive, and realistic language teaching.

Pedagogically speaking, the major implication of this discussion for language teachers can be that the two overarching perspectives on tasks (i.e. the psycholinguistic and socio-cultural) and their views on language learning and communication are not mutually exclusive. The psycholinguistic research can help language teachers and syllabus designers identify particular task features (e.g., input type, discourse mode, un/familiar information, the amount of reasoning needed, and the outcome mode) and their effects on the accuracy, fluency, and complexity of language. On the other hand, the socio-cultural approaches to task can redress some of the imbalance in the psycholinguistic approaches by dealing with the cultural and social aspects of task performance. It can help teachers realize that there is more to task performance than just the manipulation of the task features. That is, the roles adopted by learners and teachers during task performance, their attitude towards the task (as a game or as a serious learning experience), and the setting where learning occurs all affect the activity that arises from a task. Accordingly, if the teaching outcome is not what was planned, it is not the result of poor planning or bad teaching but of the participants adapting the task to achieve their particular mutual purposes. This merging of the perspectives is possible through theoretical pluralism to promote language acquisition. Thus, teachers can utilize the psycholinguistic research findings in the 'planning' of the task. At the same time, the socio-cultural research can help teachers better manage the actual behaviors that arise during the process of a lesson that have not been planned for. Consequently, it illuminates teachers on how to 'improvise' (to use Ellis's term) and efficiently conduct certain classroom activities with learners to promote their linguistic abilities and communicative skills.

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classroom use (Carless, 2007).

As for the role of culture in task implementation, there have been calls about whether the communicative approach is appropriate in countries where cultures of learning are different from western cultures. Task-based instruction has mainly an American origin with its emphasis on learner cooperation and needs assessment. Some cultures (e.g., Iranian or Chinese cultures) are more interested in knowledge accumulation than using knowledge for immediate purposes. This view conflicts with values of a learner-centered approach. Therefore, teachers need to adapt communicative language teaching (CLT) into their language teaching programs before adopting a communicatively-oriented language teaching. There can also be mismatches between the theoretical underpinnings of a culture of learning with those of the CLT (Littleweed, 2007). Littlewood refers to the Japanese learning culture which is more mimetic, teacher-oriented, and thus in conflict with CLT which focuses more on meaning than form, process than content, and different communicative styles.

Conclusion and pedagogical implications

The adoption of task as the main unit of syllabus design requires active participation on the part of the learner, as well as a more democratic and subtle contribution on the part of the teacher. This is not an easy job due to the learners and teachers' cultures of learning which may hinder them from redefining the role traditionally and conventionally assigned to them. The problem is confounded especially in eastern conservative cultures like Iran. Other more delicate issues relate to the genuineness of the tasks themselves, i. e. the pedagogically-driven tasks should be designed not for the purpose of the tasks themselves but with a real-world purpose informing them. The tasks should be such that the learners must be able to imagine themselves in the situation approximating the real world context. Finally, implementing a task-based language syllabus requires some modifications in the school policy in its handling of exams, and teaching to the tests. This way, teachers will be given more leverage to increase their understanding of tasks and their underlying assumptions, and thus modify their traditional teaching agendas for more learner-centered,

The latter view also involves 'improvisation' and creativity on the teachers' part. This requires teachers eschew their temptation to adhere to their pre-selected agenda for task selection and design and adopting a more pluralistic view taking the multifaceted nature of tasks into account.

Serious considerations about commnicative tasks as a basis for syllabus

Task selection as a unit of classroom practice gains primary focus in the shift from traditional to communicatively-oriented syllabi. Thus, class time is mainly devoted to 'rehearsing' communicative tasks which the learners wish or need to carry out in the outside world. Thus, an informed adoption of task conditions (Nunan, 1991) and the role they play in learners' communicative practice or language acquisition process is warranted. As such, some serious considerations about task purpose, task authenticity, task implementation, and task and culture need to be considered by language teachers in their adoption of tasks and by materials developers in their design of tasks.

Authenticity of task has multiple meanings. The first interpretation is that the task should have a genuine purpose, i.e. it should replicate real-world communication situations. That is language should be used for achieving a real communicative purpose. The second meaning of authenticity is that the task needs to be needs-oriented, i.e. have a clear relation to the real-world needs of the learners. Needs of course must be prioritized and weighed against their importance. An example of this priority-setting on needs analysis is given by Fanselow (1982) as he reports about a Chinese chef taught to describe her job, i.e. we need to decide whether he needs more to say "I'm slicing the onions' or take a phone order or check figures on an invoice" (p.180).

Thirdly, authentic tasks should engender classroom interaction; thus, the learner must be able to grasp the potential of the learning situation. This involves negotiation about the interest and preferences of the learners. This may look a bit ambitious for low-levels but there can still be some scope for genuine student input here (Guariento and Morely, 2001). Finally, learners need to find the task relevant to their needs and real world practices so that they can actively engage in it. An authentic task can be very simple but workable with low-level readers and offer genuine student input, e.g., simple questionnaires or class surveys whereby learners can collect information about each other and thus share it with the class. This means that authenticity is not only a feature of task, but it refers to the authenticity in terms of the learner response too.

As for task purposes, collaborative and communicative performance of tasks and solving a particular problem is the overarching concern of the task-based instruction. However, pedagogic discussions of tasks have ignored the question of learner level, and it seems that at initial levels, some planned teacher-fronted activities are fine or even necessary (Bruton, 2002). So, as Bruton argues, rather than starting with tasks and procedures and attaching purposes to them, we had better start from level of the learners and the purposes we wish to gain, and then select appropriate classroom tasks to meet those purposes.

Implementation of tasks in classroom context is probably the most challenging of all. This can be due to the multitude of factors involved in it. Research outcomes on the extent of task implementation in different contexts has shown that pupils' language proficiency, teacher attitude towards task (as more of a hindrance to than facilitator of his agenda), teachers' understanding of task, teachers' time limitations and busy schedules, and time restrictions imposed by school authorities to finish the textbook for the final exam all influence the practical suitability of tasks for

as personality and cognitive style.

The psycholinguistic view has its own problems especially its failure to demonstrate a direct relationship between task-design variables and L2 acquisition. Other factors such as nature of the task, learner setting, learner factors are not taken into account in this view either. The same task might also result in very different kinds of activity depending on the role that the teacher plays (Ellis, 2000).

Task viewed from a socio-cultural perspective assumes that the same task can result in very different kinds of activity when performed by the same learners at different times. Learners engage in and interpret tasks based on their own socio-history and locally determined goals. For example, Duff (1993) shows how a diverse range of discourse types arose from a picture description task reflecting the subjects' multiple interpretations of it. Thus, in this approach, "learning arises not through interaction but in interaction" (Ellis, 2000, p.209). Language acquisition takes place when learners actively co-construct a new function and internalize it through their assisting each other (called scaffolding). This view considers the learners, the teacher and the setting in which they interact just as important as the task itself.

The contribution of the above factors to task-base pedagogy can be looked at from two different perspectives. The psycholinguistic view is mainly concerned with language acquisition and thus developing competence, while the socio-cultural view takes language acquisition in terms of 'communicative effectiveness'. Interestingly, we notice that most of the Willis's purposes for TBI mentioned above relate primarily to communicative effectiveness, while only one or two relates specifically to L2 acquisition. This reflects the strong version of TBI which considers improving students' abilities to *use* the target language as superior to *acquiring* new linguistic

skills (Samuda, 2001). It should be borne in mind that tasks directed at improving students' communicative abilities may fail to develop their linguistic skills (Ellis, 2000). That is, communicative effectiveness does not necessarily set up the interactive conditions that promote L2 acquisition. Students may perform a task successfully without much meaning negotiation and thus adequate language acquisition. This is the main criticism that is raised against TBI, i.e. its obsession with interaction and task performance may lose sight of some presentation and practice of language, grammar, and form which are essential as a base for developing communicative competence.

It is apparent that the psycholinguistic motivation for designing and sequencing tasks, which are based on theories and findings of SLA research, needs to be supplemented with the communicative real-world rationale (a socio-cultural view of task) for selecting, grading, and sequencing of tasks. These rationales help practicing teachers understand the nature, the scope, and the value of the tasks. This necessitates incorporating a set of strategies into preservice and inservice teacher education programs in order to equip teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to do task analysis. They also need to familiarize themselves with the key components of tasks so that they can make informed decisions. More importantly, in choosing the most appropriate tasks, they need to consider the value of tasks beyond language learning, and promote the educational value of the tasks through greater learner involvement, students' personal contribution, and creating a 'unique classroom'. Therefore, a successful pedagogically relevant program of task-based design and teaching involves merging the findings of psycholinguistic research in planning for good tasks with a sociocultural perspective which views learners, teachers, and setting as important as the task itself.

Non-communicative	Pre-communicative	Communicative	Structured communication	Authentic communication
Substitution, or multiple choice exercises	Question-and-answer tasks	Information-gap activities	Role play, problem solving	Creative role play, discussion groups

The more we move from the left to the right side of the table, the more communicative and meaning based the task gets and thus entails more learner involvement. Contrarily, the more we move from right to left, the more non-communicative, and form-based it gets and thus involves less learner involvement.

Tasks should not only lead to communicative development, but to cognitive and personality development (Ribe and Vidal, 1993). That is, they need to be designed in such a way that the learners can use them as a means of directly or indirectly getting knowledgeable about the world and communicate with their peers and teachers through them, and as such develop and modify their cognitive mindsets and interpersonal relations.

Approaches to task

Basically there are two conceptualizations of tasks as the basic building blocks for syllabus design: psycholinguistic and socio-cultural.

The psycholinguistic view assumes that there are inherent properties in a task that predispose or orient learners to engage in certain types of language use and mental processing that are beneficial to acquisition. These task variables determine how effectively learners communicate and how they acquire language. Longs' (1996) Interaction hypothesis is one psycholinguistic view on language acquisition through tasks. He assumes that acquisition is best facilitated when learners obtain comprehensible input as a result of the opportunity to negotiate meaning when communication breakdown occurs (Ellis, 2000). The learners offer feedback on each others' contribution and this feedback would lead to the negotiation of meaning and reformulation of language to make the meaning more comprehensible. This modified language resulting from meaning negotiation draws learners' attention to form where the primary focus is on meaning, and in so doing the learners will 'notice' language features necessary for acquisition (Long, 1996).

Within the psycholinguistic framework, we can also refer to Skehan's cognitive approach which assumes that learners develop two systems: (a) a lexical system of mainly discrete lexical items and ready-made formulaic chunks of language which is readily accessible for occasions demanding fluent language use; (b) a rule-based system of abstract knowledge of the language patterns. He mainly focuses on task features and variables, as well as task implementation conditions that affect accuracy, fluency and complexity of the language produced.

Communicative effectiveness is yet another psycholinguistic approach to task design. It focuses on the extent to which task design and implementation impacts the learners' skillful use of language (Skehan, 2002). Therefore, it is more concerned with performance as opposed to competence. Thus, it focuses on how the learners can use the language which is appropriate to a particular context, and how they can distinguish language referents from other referents ('referent-identification), and also how learners take the feedback from their partners and establish interpersonal relationships and thus communicate effectively and intersubjectively. Effectiveness of communication is determined not only by the nature of the task but also by learner factors, such

socio-cultural. The underpinnings and implications of each approach for language teaching and research are presented and discussed from an acquisitional or communicative perspective. It is argued that for effective classroom practice, a synergistic practice of the research findings of each approach seems necessary. Thus, teachers can utilize the psycholinguistic research findings in the 'planning' of the task. At the same time, the socio-cultural research can help teachers better manage the actual behaviors that arise during the process of a lesson that have not been planned for. Finally, the main issues that task-based supporters need to take into account for the approach to be adequately adopted by language teachers will be presented and discussed.

Introduction

Task-based instruction (TBI) grew out of communicative language teaching, and thus was accepted rather uncritically. It involves pair and group work as a means of increasing learner collaboration and communication which can pave the way for language acquisition and processing to take place. Task-based language teaching (TBLT) was a reaction to the outmoded view that anything about language can be taught to an entire group of learners (Shehan, 2002). However, a task-based view assumes a more active role for the individual learners. Moreover, a good teacher should understand the language learning potential of every task, and this is underpinned by his knowledge of language learning and language use. TBLT can have strong and weak versions. A strong form takes task as the unit of language teaching, and everything else should be subsidiary, i.e. task transaction is adequate to drive forward language development. Thus, in this view it seems that second language acquisition is the result of the same process of interaction as first language acquisition. A weak form of TBI views task as pivotal in language instruction but places it in a more complex pedagogic context. This version of TBI is very close to general communicative language teaching (Skehan, 1996). It involves pre-task planning with more focus on grammar or lexis, task practice with more focus on meaning and interaction through the task to solve a particular problem through language, and post task with a focus on form.

Task-based language instruction has a number of purposes. Willis (1996: 35-6) identifies eight of them: (1) learners gain confidence in trying out any language they know; (2) they experience spontaneous interaction; (3) they notice how others express similar meanings; (4) they learn how to take negotiating turns; (5) learners engage in using language purposefully and cooperatively; (6) they can participate in a complete interaction, not just non-communicative practices; (7) learners are given chances to try out communication strategies; and (8) they gain confidence that they can achieve communicative goals. These purposes relate to two general goals: communicative effectiveness and L2 acquisition.

Definitions of tasks vary from very general to absolutely specific. Some tasks are called 'enabling' ones or technically speaking 'exercises' (e.g., grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, functions), while others are 'authentic and communicative tasks' which approximate the real world tasks outside the classroom. Essentially task is defined as "any activity learners engage into further the process of learning a language" (Williams and Burden, 1997, p. 168). The degree of 'taskness' of a task depends on the extent of learner involvement and focus on form. The following table summarizes Littlewood's (2004) insightful classification of tasks and their typical forms.