Task-Based Educational Approaches

Colloquium Papers
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I Problematising the Concept of "Task"

It is important to note that there is a long tradition of task-based educational theory and practice, going back to the work of Dewey (1916) and Kilpatrick (1918) in the United States in educational theory, with their focus on laying the educational bases for a more just and democratic society, to the work of Tyler (1949) on curriculum design and that of Shavelson & Stern (1981) in teacher decision-making, to cite only a few. The seminal book by Legutke & Thomas (1991) documents extensively the use of the concept of 'task' as a curriculum planning tool, particularly in the field of so-called 'experiential learning', emphasising how tasks can be matched to learning perhaps following the definition offered by Prabhu (1991): "...a cyclic process integrating immediate experience, reflection, abstract conceptualization and practical action".

In the specific field of language education, the use of the concept of 'task' was characteristic in the pioneering ESP studies and materials of the 1970's, in innovatory multi-media ESL materials like Challenges (1978-80), and passim in the theory and much of the practice associated with communicative language teaching in the 70's and 80's and currently. A number of definitions of 'task' are available in the literature, one of which (not my own!) captures the essentials:

"...any structured language learning endeavour which has a particular objective, appropriate content, a specific 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 purpose of facilitating language learning" (Breen, 1987).

It is worthwhile noting that tasks are not necessarily only focussed on thematic or subject-matter content, they can as well be directed at matters of linguistic content (in the broadest sense) and, indeed to matters of enhancing learning strategies. Inevitably, tasks touch on all these important curriculum areas. In short, there are many groups who find the concept useful to their work: curriculum theorists like Nunan (1989) and Breen (1987), ESP specialists like Swales (1991), SLA researchers like Long (1985) and Crookes (1986), and a host of materials writers internationally.

ISSUE #1 How close to the 'real' world?

Here the issue to be addressed is the degree to which tasks can be said to mirror the real-life world of the learner-participants, either concurrently with their language learning or after the course. Against the arguments for maximum verisimilitude proposed
by early ESP theorists and curriculum designers (cf Munby) and more recent ones (Long & Crookes, 1992), critics have pointed to the essential reductionism of such approaches, the practical difficulties of assessing ambiguous and transient needs, the resistance by some learners to classroom attempts to match their realities (Candlin et al, 1976) and some have questioned the nature of the authenticity itself, believing that all events and all ‘realities’ are transformed in the reframing process of pedagogy such that to speak of verisimilitude is a deluding chimera (Johnson, Baumgratz).

ISSUE #2 How "etic" and how "emic" are tasks to be?

Here the issue is one of whether tasks seek to mirror surface representations (cf Issue #1 above) or focus on underlying representations. Should tasks not rather seek to capture what Hasan refers to as generic structure potential (GSP), i.e. the underlying patterning of tasks, seeking thereby to provide some generalisable and learnable scripts which can be realised variously and creatively by learners in different contexts of situation? If so, the question then arises as to the terms in which such ‘deep structures’ of tasks are to be couched: sociolinguistically and discoursally only, or also psycholinguistically? This in turn raises the issue of how tasks focussed on promoting particular communication strategies can at the same time be targeted on enhancing particular productive learning strategies among learners.

ISSUE #3 How is the ‘real world’ to be defined? How is it to be represented pedagogically?

If tasks are to mirror the ‘real’ world, we have to inquire who determines the participants and their roles, what institutional relationships with which distribution of power and solidarity are to be selected for representation, which topics are to be chosen, and by whom? Whose social and personal purposes are to emphasised?

In such a pedagogic representation of ‘reality’, we have first to ask how feasible such a representation is, what systematic refraction of reality must take place? What possibilities are there for cultural isomorphism between “out there” and inside the class? Indeed, what is the social potential of the classroom in terms of matching the external contexts of situation? What is the influence of learners on the task as workplan (Breen, 1987)? In what ways can pedagogic tasks resemble real-world tasks? What potential is there for a transfer of cognitive activity?

II Researching the Concept of "Task"

A: Focus on task design and discourse product

ISSUE #1 What factors in task design (input + activity) affect what language output?

Here the issue is how do transactional tasks of various types and interpersonal tasks of various types affect the learners’ language output; in particular can tasks be designed to target particular features in the lexico-grammar or in the discourse? Berwick (1988) established that type of task is an important determinant of discourse output, as
did Wright (1987, 1991), but as Nunan (1992) comments, Duff’s (1986) research in a similar vein showed mixed results, implying tasks may not be distinct enough as constructs to allow measurement of progress and that the subject-matter of tasks interacts in unpredictable ways with task procedure in affecting outcomes (see also Doughty & Pica, 1986; Brown & Yule, 1983). Further, can tasks be designed with divergent and convergent outcomes with a focus on peer correction, especially on repair strategies (Candlin & Ferguson, 1990)?

What is the effect of learner variables on learner output in task execution? For example, NS versus NNS, learners of different proficiency levels, tasks where the teacher-learner roles are varied or where the context of the task varies the power and distance relationships of the participants (Porter, 1986; Bruton & Samuda, 1980; Gass & Varonis, 1985; European Science Foundation Adult SLA Project passim, 1987).


B: Focus on task design and cognitive processes

ISSUE #2 What links can be made between task design and cognitive processes?

Here the issue is whether tasks can be designed to target particular cognitive processes, for example, attending, selectively recognising, going beyond the information given, transferring and generalising? How finely can tasks be targetted? Can one match a task say to hypothesising or judging? Can tasks be matched to particular learning strategies? (Willing, 1988; Wenden, 1992; O’Malley and Chamot, 1989)

III Task-Based Language Teaching: What Are the Issues?

ISSUE #1 How can tasks be operationalized?

Here the issue is what the procedures are for transforming ‘real world’ tasks into pedagogic tasks. What are the distinguishing criteria among tasks? (Brown & Yule, 1983) What are the principles for selection of task-appropriate delivery modes -- audio-visual, CALL, IVD? (Wright, 1987)

ISSUE #2 What are the significant non-task variables?

(1) **Problematicity**: To what extent does a given task depend on particular participant ability and knowledge?

(2) **Implementability**: What are the resource demands of a given task, in terms of task content and task process? How adaptable are tasks?

(3) **Learner Variables**: (cf II above), but including personality, preferred style/strategy.
(4) **Instructional Variables**: What is the effect on task execution of varied instructional strategies and teacher decision-making?

(5) **Relevance**: How can tasks be designed so that they are relevant to learner needs? How can tasks-in-progress accommodate to changing learner needs? (Breen, 1987)

(6) **Motivation**: How can tasks be responsive to learners’ intrinsic and extrinsic motivation? How can tasks encourage such motivation? Can enhanced motivation be appraised?

**ISSUE #3** How can task complexity be measured? (Candlin, 1987)

(1) How can one distinguish between what is cognitively difficult and what is communicatively difficult? Can tasks be graded such that cognitive complexity is gradually increased without raising the communicative load? and vice-versa?

(2) Can the concept of communicative stressfulness of tasks (e.g. that conversing on a known topic with a known interlocutor is less stressful than addressing a group of unknown persons on a less familiar topic where argument rather than description is involved) (Brown and Yule, 1983) be applied across skills? Can it be applied to curriculum design as a general principle?

(3) In reading and listening tasks, can we adjust the interpretive density of our questions to the code complexity of the text, and vice-versa? Can this be done systematically in a curriculum?

(4) What is the effect of task complexity on learner output? Are more difficult tasks less productive of learner discourse? Of different kinds of discourse? If cognitive load can be measured in technical skill tasks can this be done also for language learning tasks?

Brindley (1987) proposes the following factors as determinants of the complexity of tasks:

**Relevance:**

Is the task meaningful and relevant to the learner?

**Complexity:**

How many steps are involved in the task? How complex are the instructions? What cognitive demands does the task make on the learner? How much information is the learner expected to process in performing the task?
Amount of prior context:
How much prior knowledge of the world, the situation or the cultural context is assumed in the way the task is framed? How much preliminary activity is allowed for to introduce the task and set the context?

Processability of the language of the task:
Is the language that the learners are expected to produce in line with their processing capacity?

Amount of help:
How much assistance can the learner get from the teacher, other learners, books or other learning aids? In the case of interactive tasks, is the interlocutor sympathetic, does he/she provide help? What is his/her tolerance level for non-standard language?

Degree of grammatical accuracy/contextual appropriacy:
How standard does the task require the learners to be? What is the desired effect on the interlocutor? Does he/she demand accuracy?

Time available:
How long does the learner have to carry out the task?

ISSUE #4 What are potential tasks targets?
1. Linguistic/discoursal
2. Cognitive/strategic
3. Subject matter themes and topics
4. Social structures/groupings

ISSUE #5 How can tasks be set and staged within the curriculum?

Here the response depends on the prior responses to Issues 1-4 in this section, and in particular to the issue of the overall approach to curriculum design which is adopted, in particular whether the syllabus is a lockstepped one or a negotiated one, whether language-oriented or skill oriented, whether proficiency or achievement focussed. It depends also on the ways in which classroom experiences are structured and in particular how interpersonal relationships are managed within the class. For example, if there is no language-based task sequencing, how necessary or possible is it to have task complexity-based sequencing? Can learners be trained through procedurally and cognitively-focussed tasks to select their own learning pathways? If so, is this best done thematically or in cognitive and communicative complexity terms? How much does this depend on the learner’s awareness of target competencies? What is the effect of teacher-led versus learner-led activity (Candlin, 1986; Breen & Candlin, 1981; Parkinson & O’Sullivan, 1991; Brindley, 1990)?

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IV  Problematising Research in Task-Based Learning

ISSUE #1  What kind of language output is being simulated/measured? What is salient?

There is an overwhelming focus on quantification of largely decontextualized lexico-grammar or equally decontextualized and non discoursally-grounded speech act realisations. There is little evidence of a lexico-grammar rooted in a social context (though see Berwick, 1988 and Wright, 1987) along the lines fundamental to Halliday, Givon -- i.e. the salience of the grammaticising of personal and interpersonal intention. In consequence, there is little focus on discoursal strategies, for example procedures of turntaking or pragmatic issues of (in)directness, and no focus on macro-discoursal management (cf Willing, 1992 on meeting strategies and workplace problem-solving).

ISSUE #2  What kinds of cognitive strategy are being highlighted and enhanced?

Despite the focus on learning strategies (Willing, 1988; Wenden and Rubin, 1985; Wenden, 1992; Cohen, 1989; O'Malley & Chamot, 1989) here the problem is partly the difficulty of determining what are the salient cognitive strategies for language learning and identifying them, in particular the problem faced by any task of uniquely or even mainly targeting a single strategy (cf II above) and, even if this problem could be overcome, partly the issue of determining which strategy(ies) should be focussed on for which learners at which point in their development.

ISSUE #3  What kinds of social and interactional context for tasks are being selected?

In particular, there is a failure to acknowledge sufficiently that task output is not only, or even primarily, a learner responsibility but a joint responsibility of the target language speaker and the non-native speaker. We might even say that the quality of NNS output is overwhelmingly a TLS responsibility (European Science Foundation Adult Second Language Acquisition Project passim, Willing 1992). Three quotations underscore this important point:

(1) "...inadequate language competence is not due to poor texts and materials, learners’ low motivation, inadequate learning theories and teaching methodologies...instead, language competence remains a barrier to employment, education and economic wellbeing due to political forces of our own making. For while modern social and economic systems require certain kinds of language competence, they simultaneously create conditions which ensure that vast numbers of people will be unable to acquire that competence..." (Tollefson, 1990)

(2) "conversational analysis has been resistant to making connections between (such) micro structures of conversation and the macro structures of institutions and societies. As a result it gives a rather implausible image...of conversation as a skilled social practice existing in a social vacuum." (Fairclough, 1989)
"...the point to be made here is that the placing of the responsibility to learn through interaction on the individual migrant worker grotesquely ignores the communicative reality of most NNS-NS interactions for such groups. This is to be expressed not only in terms of sheer access to L2 language data, but more especially in terms of the types of interactions in which such migrant workers could exercise that initiative in language management which research in the laboratory settings tells us is fundamental to language acquisition. The power to influence the quality of communicative interaction to enable acquisition does not reside in the individual...there is a dynamic and struggling relationship between structure and power in society and equally between such institutionalised social structures and the opportunities available for language acquisition." (Candlin, 1991)

Most current research fails to address adequately the organising principles and practices of the interactions, in particular how the issues and the participants are to be defined i.e. what cooperating/conflicting positions characterise participant roles, choice of topics, types of interaction, expected outcomes. Nor is it clear at all what constitutes 'successful' communication within such experimental tasks. Are they referring to intelligibility, sense identification, appreciation of illocutionary values, or appropriateness of strategy?

V Tasks and Task-Based Learning and Teaching: Problem-Posing in the Classroom

Breen & Candlin (1981) suggested that tasks might be characterised by two main criteria: that in keeping with the variable knowledge, abilities, skills, needs, and purposes of learners, they should be differentiated in terms of input, process, outcomes and assessment, and that in keeping with the nature of learning, such tasks should be both problem-posing and (potentially) problem-solving. In terms of the key task components of content, procedure, context and purpose, Breen (1987) extended the criterion of differentiation in particular by a number of acute observations: that task content was both communicative and metacommunicative; that task design cannot control content since learners continually redefine its nature; that task procedure cannot determine unobservable cognitive activity and accordingly which skills, abilities and strategies are being activated is not an empirically verifiable matter; that task content is crucial, in particular the influence of the social realities of the classroom on the privileging of particular discourses, the assignment of roles and functions, the influence of expectations and values on discoursal choice; that in terms of task purpose, learners will redefine the task in terms of their own particular objectives, and in particular, Breen argues, "...they will apply their own procedural capacities to a task so that they can complete it in their way, regardless of task instructions". What is important to learners is their affective engagement with the task, itself a product of their appreciation of the cost-benefit of the task to them.

In terms of the problem-posing nature of tasks, key contributions have been made by Auerbach and Wallerstein (1986) and Pennycook (1989) both theoretically and in terms of curriculum and materials design. In particular, Auerbach and Wallerstein’s distribution of tasks into awareness-raising tasks (what do I/we know?), knowledge-gaining tasks (what do I/we need to find out?), concern-posing tasks (how can this be...
challenged?), and action-specifying tasks (what action can I/we take?), has been especially productive in workplace materials design (Byrnes & Candlin, 1991, 1992), especially as it has proved possible to associate characteristic discourses and cognitive operations with each of these. Legutke & Thomas (1991) draw usefully on Bastian and Gudjohns (1986) to summarise the fundamental characteristics of project-learning (as an extension of tasks):

* to be related to life and the social world as well as to language and learning
* to be involving of learners affects as well as knowledge
* to be experimental as well as experiential
* to be jointly constructed and negotiated and to be investigative
* to be learner-centred in terms of contributions and display of knowledge, abilities and interests
* to be dependent on cooperative activity and to be promotive of autonomy and self-direction
* to be concerned with products as well as with processes and to be interdisciplinary
* to enable learners and teachers to take on a multiplicity of roles
* to be the basis for an open, process-oriented curriculum

Legutke & Thomas provide a useful definition of project work which may serve also for this discussion tasks:

It is a theme and task-centred mode of teaching and learning which results from a joint process of negotiation between all participants. It allows for a wide scope of self-determined action for both the individual and the small group of learners within a general framework of a plan which defines goals and procedures. Project learning realizes a dynamic balance between a process and product orientation. Finally, it is experiential and holistic because it bridges the dualism between body and mind, theory and practice, or in John Dewey’s words “experience and thinking” (Dewey, 1916).
VI  Conclusion

It may be helpful to conclude with the following list of "rewards" from task-based language learning listed in Candlin (1987), suggesting that it provides for:

* a restructuring of the relationship between curriculum guidelines, syllabuses and classroom accounts

* a reevaluation of the relationship between input data, information resources, learning processes and instructional procedures

* a re-estimation of the relationship between goal-based and norm-referenced evaluation

* a review of the role relationships of 'teachers' and 'learners' in task co-participation

* a re-emphasis of the potential of the classroom as a place for exploration of language and language learning

* a renewing of a critical perspective on the understanding of second language acquisition and the place of language learning in the social identity of the learner.
REFERENCES


