TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING: A GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

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Task-based language teaching (TBLT) has attracted increasing attention from the language teaching profession since Candlin and Murphy's (1987) seminal publication on language learning tasks. This approach to language teaching draws mainly on research into L2 acquisition. However, not only SLA researchers advocate the use of tasks in ELT; many teacher educators such as Prabhu (1987), Willis (1996), Nunan (1989, 2004), and Van den Branden (2006) have also presented a strong case for TBLT, drawing on both their own experience of language teaching and general educational theory. It is important to recognize that there is no single way of doing TBLT. However, TBLT is characterised by use of authentic communication, attention to meaning, focus on form in meaning focused activities, inclusion of pragmatic properties, importance of interactional processes that crop up in natural language use, integration of language skills, and a strong connection to psycholinguistic processes.

From a pedagogic point of view, the principles underlying TBLT are:

- Focus on experiential learning and learner activity.
- Selection of tasks derived from needs analysis.
- Use of authentic texts and materials.
- Connection of classroom language learning with real language use outside the classroom.
- Emphasis on interaction as the means of learning to communicate.

TBLT is an attempt to exploit and support the benefits of a focus on meaning adopting an analytic syllabus, while dealing with its shortcomings by advocating a simultaneous focus on form. The key terms associated to this approach are now glossed alphabetically.

Activities: These refer to those specific procedures and subtasks that learners and teacher are to do in relation to the input. They are the point of departure for the learning task. An example might be: learners will listen to a weather forecast and identify the predicted maximum and minimum temperatures of the day.

Analytic syllabus: Analytic approaches to syllabus design are organised in terms of the purposes for which people learn a language and the different types of language performance that are necessary to meet those purposes. Hence analytic refers not to what the syllabus designer does, but to the operations required of the learner. In an analytic syllabus, previous analysis of the language system into a set of discrete parts/pieces of language is, for the most part, not necessary. Task-based syllabuses belong to this category.

Authenticity: Authentic teaching materials are those which have been produced for purposes other than to teach language (newspapers, labels, video clips, extracts from television, radio and newspapers, signs, maps and charts). Those adopting a strong position regarding authenticity insist that these materials should not be edited in any way. Despite the difficulties associated with the use of authentic materials, they are justified on the grounds that especially produced texts are artificial. It is also argued that the problem is that comprehending and manipulating scripted dialogues does not automatically transfer to comprehending and using language in real communicative situations. Some teachers argue that very often the quality of audio recordings is so poor (and the task, in any case, is so much more difficult than comprehension in face-to-face interactions) that these have to be re-recorded or simulated.

Although authenticity is by and large understood in terms of the materials used in a given teaching activity, there are, in fact, other equally important types of authenticity. Candlin and Edelhoff (1982) suggest that there are at least four types of authenticity which are important for language learning and teaching. These are:

- authenticity of goal,
- environment,
- text, and
- task.

Nunan (1989) establishes that another important type of authenticity is what might be called *"learner authenticity"*. The latter involves the realisation and acceptance by the learner of the authenticity of a given text, task, set of materials or learning activity. For a learner to authenticate materials, these need, at least, to meet two conditions. In the first place, they need to be recognised by learners as having a legitimate place in the language classroom. Secondly, they must engage the interests of the learner by relating to his/her interests, background knowledge and experience, and, through these, stimulate genuine communication.

Closed task: A task that requires learners to arrive at a single, correct answer or one out of a limited number of possible solutions (for example, *Work in pairs to find the six differences between the pictures and write them down*).

Cognitive complexity: It refers to the degree of difficulty of the cognitive processes/operations that are required to complete a task. This concept has to be understood in an information processing framework, which maintains that humans have a limited processing capacity.

Cognitive processes: In psychology, cognitive processes are used to refer to the mental functions, thoughts and states of intelligent entities such as mind, reasoning, perception, intelligence, learning, and many others that describe capabilities of the mind.

Communicative language teaching:
Communicative language teaching (CLT) is an approach characterized by a focus on the development of functional language ability through an emphasis on learner participation in communicative events in the classroom. The concept of *communicative competence* is central in this approach, as it challenged Chomsky's view of language on the grounds that Chomsky paid exclusive attention to correctness at the expense of *appropriacy* of use in specific contexts. CLT is essentially concerned with the meaning potential of language and the concepts of negotiation, interpretation, and expression.

Nowadays, CLT has become a term for the various methods and curricula that embrace both the goals and the processes of classroom learning, for teaching practice that regards competence in terms of social interaction and

aims at developing language acquisition research to account for its development. CLT is characterized by:

1. An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language.
2. A focus on learners' communicative needs.
3. The provision of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on language but also on the learning process.
4. The use of information gap activities that have the potential to carry elements of unpredictability and freedom of choice in terms of what to say and how to say it.
5. The integration of the four language skills.
6. An enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning.
7. An increasing tendency to use authentic materials/texts in relation to listening and reading skills.
8. The link between classroom language learning and language activities outside the classroom.

Communication or Communicative Tasks: Tasks carried out through language according to procedures for communication which require task participants to linguistically encode and act upon information and sharing of meaning.

Convergent tasks: Those designed to enable learners to solve problems through social interaction with others (through conversation correspondence) and so come to decisions and mutually accepted solutions with others.

Divergent tasks: These include discussions, debates, role-plays, etc. and are designed to establish and maintain relationships and discuss topics of interest through the exchange of information, ideas, feelings, etc. Participants take a stand on one side of the issue and argue their positions.

First generation task: According to Ribé and Vidal (1993), first generation tasks are a typical communicative task used in the classroom. Information gaps or role plays would belong to this category. The aim of a first generation task is *"primarily to develop communicative ability in a specific area of the language being taught"* (Ribé and Vidal, 1993: 2). Their use in the classroom is typically dictated by the demands of the structural syllabus.

Focus on form: In Applied Linguistics, focus on form refers only to those form-focused activities that arise during, and are embedded in, meaning-based lessons; they are not scheduled in advance, as is the case with focus on forms, but occur incidentally as a function of the interaction of learners with the subject matter or tasks that constitute the learners' and their teacher's predominant focus. The goal is to help students notice (Schmidt, 1993) forms in the input so that they can store them in memory. Schmidt (1994) has also argued that there is no learning without conscious attention to form. For him, attention to form refers to the noticing of specific linguistic features, not awareness of grammatical rules. According to Ellis (2005), we can encourage a focus on form in a number of ways:

1. Through grammar activities designed to help learners acquire specific grammatical features by means of input- or output processing. Both inductive and deductive strategies can be used.
2. Through focused tasks. These are language learning tasks that aim at helping learners to comprehend and process specific grammatical structures in the input, and/or to produce the structures in the performance of the task.
3. By means of methodological options that induce attention to form in the context of performing a task: language awareness (James and Garret, 1991), consciousness-raising (Rutherford, 1987), or input enhancement (Sharwood-Smith, 1993). However, we would wish to reiterate that this should not be an end in itself; whichever approach is being taken, it should be with the intention of developing both implicit knowledge and communication. In other words, attention

to meaning is even more central in the facilitation of language acquisition. A meaning-focussed classroom seeks to involve learners in purposeful tasks which are embedded in meaningful contexts and which reflect and rehearse language as it is used authentically in the world outside the classroom. Meaning-focused instruction supplies the learner with input for processing. It also provides opportunities for learner output, and this contributes to the acquisition of implicit knowledge (Ellis, 1990).

Focused tasks: Tasks designed to provide opportunities for communicative language practice, using some specific linguistic (grammatical) feature. Nonetheless, focused tasks must still meet task criteria. This is why the target linguistic feature in a focused task is not made explicit for learners. The difference between a focused task and a *situational grammar exercise* is that, in the latter, learners are made aware of what grammatical structure they are supposed to be producing.

Form-focused instruction: A general term widely used to refer to any pedagogical technique, explicit or implicit, proactive or reactive, used to draw students' attention to language form. It includes focus on form procedures, but also all the activities used for focus on forms, such as exercises written specifically to teach a grammatical structure and used proactively (i.e., at moments the teacher, and not the learner, has decided will be appropriate for learning the new item).

Grading: In a task-based syllabus, grading is determined by the inherent degree of difficulty of the pedagogical tasks themselves (from simple to more complex ones). In addition, there are other variables used to determine the difficulty of a task such as variety, pace and duration,... In TBLT, difficulty does not exclusively refer to the linguistic demands of the task. Rather, it makes reference to the difficulty posed by pedagogical tasks in relation to aspects such as the number of steps involved in their execution, the intellectual challenge they present, the assumptions the tasks make about presupposed knowledge, the number of participants involved, or their location (or not) in displaced time and space.

Input data: This refers to the material that learners work on (for example, a newspaper or a video clip). Input data can be:

- verbal (a dialogue) or non-verbal (a picture).
- authentic (characterized by a great variety and richness and thus easy to select the input appropriate to the needs, interests and proficiency levels of the learners) or specifically produced for the purpose of language teaching.

Learning, pedagogic or learning-for-communication tasks: These focus on the exploration and stimulation of internal processes of language acquisition and are obviously selected with reference to some theory or model of Second Language Acquisition. These tasks will provide learners with skills for those real-world tasks which are difficult to predict in advance or which are not feasible to practice in class. Learning tasks will typically focus on a formal feature (or features) of the L2, and tend to have very specific learning outcomes (e.g. students will *learn* about the different forms of the verb *to be* in the present simple). A learning task could be said to focus only on linguistic competence.

Learning how to learn: This refers to the need to develop awareness of the different aspects involved in learning a foreign language. No other educational goal is more important for students and for society than learning how to learn to become autonomous and independent learners. By teaching learning, we are trying to help students gain a deeper understanding of the process of language learning by encouraging the acquisition of appropriate learning strategies and fostering motivation for learning. Through insight, learners come to understand the relationship between a specific behaviour and a particular outcome. They learn to understand the nature of their cognitive functioning, the reasons for failure and success, and the processes leading to specific results.

Mediation: Mediation refers to a special quality of interaction between a learner and another person – a *mediator*. The function of a mediator is different from that of a teacher. The goal of mediation is to empower, to help learners acquire the knowledge, skills and strategies they will need in order to make progress, to learn more effectively, to function effectively in a rapidly changing society, and to meet new and unpredictable demands. Mediation is also concerned with helping learners to develop autonomy, to take control of their own learning, with the fundamental aim of enabling them to become independent thinkers and problem-solvers.

Metacognition: This concept has been defined simply as thinking about thinking, cognition of cognition, or, using Flavell's (1979: 906) words, *"knowledge and cognition about cognitive phenomena"*. It could also be described as awareness of oneself as a cognitive being. What is basic to the concept of metacognition is the notion of thinking about one's own thoughts. Those thoughts can be of what one knows (i.e., metacognitive knowledge), what one is currently doing (i.e., metacognitive skill), or what one's current cognitive or affective state is (i.e., metacognitive experience).

Teaching practices congruent with a metacognitive approach to learning include those that focus on sense-making, self-assessment, and reflection on what worked well and what needs further attention in learning.

Negotiation of meaning: This term has been used to characterise the modification and restructuring of interaction that occurs when learners and their interlocutors anticipate, perceive, or experience difficulties in message comprehensibility.

Needs analysis: The goals of needs analysis in CLT are concerned with the identification of learners' real-world communicative requirements so that textbook designers and teachers can create courses that reflect and prepare learners meaningfully for their intended uses of the target language.

One-way tasks: Those in which information is held by only one participant, who is required to convey it to the other.

Open task: In contrast to a closed task, an open task is one that is more loosely structured, with a less specific goal (for example, *In groups of three compare memories of childhood holidays. Then write the one you consider more interesting and give it to another group*).

PPP (Presentation-practice-production): Language teaching, when it has a linguistic basis, whether this is specified in a list of grammar structures or in a list of language functions and notions, usually employs this methodological procedure. That is to say, language is first presented to the students by means of examples. The new language is then practised in a controlled fashion using exercises. Finally, the teacher creates opportunities for free language production. The implication is that language acquisition takes place sequentially; it is the accumulation of the different parts.

Pre-task phase: Task-based learning consists of several stages. The pre-task phase introduces the class to the topic and the (final) task activating relevant language, and, most important of all, creates interest in doing the final task. In this phase, learners also learn new language that will help them cope with the task.

Problem-solving tasks: These are also known as reasoning-gap tasks. They involve deriving some new information through processes of inference, deduction, etc. and seem to prompt high levels of interaction, negotiation of comprehensible input and opportunities for practising enabling skills such as fluency, discourse and interactional analysis, mastery of phonological elements and mastery of grammar.

Real-world tasks: These require learners to approximate in class the sorts of behaviours required of them in the world beyond the classroom. They are usually selected on the basis of needs analysis, and somehow represent the rehearsal approach to language development.

Reasoning-gap tasks: See problem-solving tasks.

Report stage: This stage gives learners a natural stimulus to improve and upgrade their language. Learners focus on form as well as on meaning. It also gives other learners the opportunity to hear or read what other learners have produced.

Second generation tasks: A second generation task is more challenging than a first generation task, requiring learners not only to manipulate language, but also to use general cognitive abilities while dealing with information. In Ribé and Vidal's words (1993: 2),

> *Second generation tasks focus primarily on content, procedure and language. The learner is challenged mentally in these areas and the tasks aim at developing not only language skills, but also general cognitive strategies of handling and organising information... Language becomes a vehicle for doing a "real" piece of work. This implies using not one, but a range of structures, functions and lexical sets. Language is then approached globally, not sequentially.*

Synthetic syllabus: In *synthetic* approaches to syllabus design, different parts of the language are taught separately and in a step-by-step fashion. This type of syllabus regards acquisition as a process of gradual accumulation of parts until the whole structure of language has been reconstructed.

Task: Nowadays, the most commonly used and widely accepted definition of task is that of language activity in which there is a focus on *meaning* over *form*. This type of task is often referred to as a *communicative task*; it does not include, for example, translation tasks or grammar-based exercises. In spite of the increasing number of publications on TBLT, there is no consensus regarding the definition of *task*. A task has been defined in many different ways; some of the most common definitions include the following. In the Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics (Richards et al., 1986: 289) we can read the following definition:

> *[…]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, 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 language teaching more communicative […] since it provides a purpose for a classroom activity which goes beyond the practice of language for its own sake.*

For Nunan (1989: 10), a communicative task is a:

> *piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right with a beginning, a middle and an end.*

Despite the multiplicity of definitions of *task*, researchers agree that for a language teaching activity to be acknowledged as a *task* it must meet the following criteria:

1. There is general consensus that tasks are things people do and that they are goal-directed.
2. A task should facilitate meaningful interaction and offer the learner sufficient opportunity to process meaningful input and produce meaningful output in order to facilitate language acquisition.
3. The primary focus should be on *meaning*; that is, learners must be mainly concerned with processing the semantic and pragmatic meaning of utterances.
4. Tasks should result in a kind of language use that resembles that in the outside world.
5. There should be some kind of *gap*, i.e. a need to convey information or to express an opinion.
6. There should be emphasis on learner activity. Learners are asked to work to reach certain goals and to make functional use of language in order to do so.
7. Learners should largely have to rely on their own resources (linguistic and non-linguistic) in order to complete the task.

8. There is a clearly defined outcome other than the use of language. In this way, the language serves as the means for achieving the outcome, not as an end in its own right.

Task components: Several authors have made attempts to identify the elements that are involved in a task. Nunan (1989) identifies six task components: input data, activities or procedures, goals, roles of teachers, roles of learners and a setting.

Task cycle: A phase of the framework for task-based learning that gives learners the opportunity to use the language they know to carry out the task, and then to improve the language while planning their reports of the tasks (see report stage).

Task difficulty: One the complex issues in TBLT is how to determine task difficulty. Several attempts have been made to identify the variables that contribute to task difficulty. One of the most comprehensive descriptions of task difficulty is the one provided by Brindley (1987). Brindley suggests that task difficulty is determined by the following variables:

- relevance to the learner;
- complexity (number of the steps involved in the execution of the task, complexity of the instructions, cognitive demands, quantity of information);
- amount of context provided and knowledge of the world required;
- language demands;
- assistance given;
- accuracy required;
- time available.

Task-based language teaching (TBLT): Teaching approach based on the exclusive use of tasks. It represents a challenge to mainstream views about language teaching by maintaining that language learning will be most effective if teaching creates contexts in which the learners can practise language and a natural language learning capacity can be nurtured rather than making a systematic attempt to teach the language in small doses. This approach uses a process syllabus. TBLT, in line with social-constructivist views on learning in general, regards language learning as an active process that can only be successful if the learner invests intensive mental effort in performing tasks. It also regards learning as an interactive process that can be enhanced by interacting with other learners and/or the teacher.

Task-based syllabus: A syllabus is primarily a plan of what is to be achieved through teaching and learning. Such a plan, most typically, maps out that body of knowledge and those capabilities which are regarded as valuable outcomes from teaching and learning. In most cases, the syllabus (plan) will specify and select particular aspects of a target language and/or its use in social situations for a range of personal and social purposes. In this sense, a task-based syllabus tries to organise and present what is to be achieved through teaching and learning in terms of how a learner may engage his/her own communicative competence in undertaking successfully a series of tasks, and how learners may develop this competence through learning how to learn and how to communicate. A task-based syllabus plan consists of two major task types: learning/pedagogical tasks and communicative tasks. Accordingly, task-based syllabuses do not divide language into small pieces; instead, they adopt holistic, functional and communicative tasks, rather than any linguistic form, as the unit of analysis. A task-based syllabus must be designed taking into account:

- the learners' capacity to develop their own initial communicative competence
- the learners' capacity to impose order on new knowledge and required capabilities.

Third generation tasks: These are similar to second generation tasks in that they involve the same language and cognitive strategies, but third generation tasks have a wider purpose:

They aim at developing the personality of the student through the foreign language. Third generation tasks fulfil wider educational

> *objectives (attitudinal change and motivation, learner awareness, etc.) and so are especially appropriate for the school setting, where motivation for the learning of the foreign language needs to be enhanced... Some of the main characteristics of third generation tasks are a high degree of task authenticity, globality and integration of language and contents and involvement of all the aspects of the individual's personality, previous experience and knowledge; this includes artistic, musical, literary interests, hobbies and concerns. Creativity is usually the factor that links all these elements.* (Ribé and Vidal, 1993: 3)

Two-way task: A two-way task is one in which each participant has some knowledge not shared by another participant; participants are then set a task or a problem which can only be solved if they pool their information.

Unfocused tasks: These are tasks designed to provide learners with opportunities for using language in general communicatively.

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