Thirty Years of Task-Based Language Teaching

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Abstract

This paper looks back at 30 years of research and practice in Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), and assesses its impact on classroom language teaching in the 21st century. After introducing the background to the first suggestion of TBLT in the midst of the communicative language teaching debate of the 1980s, we attempt a definition of *task* in this context. Then we look at different types of task and also their implementation in the classroom. Finally we describe how a task can be used effectively in a language class for non-specialist students in a university.

Introduction

We find a great difference between the degree of consensus on the subject of language teaching aims on one hand and language teaching methods on the other. There is general agreement that at the end of a foreign language course students should be able to use the language to do useful things, such as order food in a restaurant or introduce themselves. They need *everyday* or *living* language skills, especially in speaking. However, when we discuss how this is to be achieved, there are wide diversities of opinion.

In debates about language teaching methods there are several main areas of disagreement. Arguments tend to be about three main questions. The first concerns discourse versus discrete points. One school of thought insists that a first language is learned in phrases and sentences understood from the situation, and proposes this as a model for second language learning. In opposition to this is the idea that language is a system that must be split into its component parts such as grammar rules and vocabulary items in order to be understood; only when students understand the patterns of the language can they make useful and well-formed sentences. The second point of disagreement is about the roles of the teacher and learner.

The teacher-centered school sees the teacher as the authority figure, the one who talks the most and who decides the content and plan of the lesson. In contrast, the learner-centered supporter would argue that each learner has their own interests, personality and “internal syllabus” and that learning is most effective when learners are given the chance to co-operate with each other and to take decisions for themselves. The third and final area of disagreement is over communication versus form. The communication school prioritizes achieving communicative goals, doing useful things with language. For them inaccuracy is a natural by-product of trying to communicate, rather than a bad habit to be eradicated at all costs. On the other side we have the form-focussed school who see the first aim of language teaching as helping the students to make grammatically correct sentences, which then make effective communication possible. In sum, we observe general agreement about the goal of language teaching, but a wide range of opinions on how the goal is to be achieved.

The Origins of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)

In the 1950s and 60s the predominant model of language teaching was the grammar translation method, in which the mastery of separate grammatical and vocabulary items was the first priority. Presentation of discrete items by the teacher, followed by practice by the students, and finally use in functional language activities was the preferred order of events. “Learners were expected to transfer the explicit knowledge of form into the meaningful, integrated use of language.” (Van den Branden, et al 2009, 3). This led to dissatisfaction among some learners and teachers. There was a general suspicion that to treat the learner like a machine, with the thought that learning was a succession of stimulus-response cycles on the behaviorist model, was misrepresenting the capacities of the learner. At the same time, theoretical linguistic research in such fields as semantics, pragmatics and sociolinguistics emphasized that language use in the real world was very complex, and revealed a new set of unwritten rules of language use which constituted another body of knowledge to be added to the normal language rules. In a separate body of research into first language acquisition researchers such as Brown (1973) and Halliday (1975) showed that children learning their first language do not start with rules and then build meaningful sentences, but rather they use their language for useful interactions and only later become aware of the rules.

In addition to research into adult language use and child first language acquisition, there were changes in general educational thinking. Pedagogical psychologists and theorists such as Dewey (1938) and Vygotsky (1978) suggested that education should aim for ability as much as knowledge, and thus the learner should be given a greater role in relation to the teacher. It was suggested that the teacher should

manage social interaction and that students could learn by solving a succession of problems.

In parallel with these developments in linguistics research and educational thought, language educators were investigating new ways of teaching languages. Realizing that communicating in a second language involves much more that producing grammatically correct utterances, teachers aimed to help their students achieve "communicative competence" (Canale and Swain, 1980). Thus there was a shift from knowledge of the language to communication in the language. Proponents of this type of teaching, which was always known as the communicative *approach* rather that the communicative *method*, emphasized doing things through language, in other words functional language learning. At the same time the idea of giving the students more control over their learning, was proposed by the *learner autonomy* movement (Holec, 1985). However, although this sounds like a leap forward in language teaching, when these ideas were applied without sufficient thought, they resulted in students being presented with language beyond their level of comprehension, so there was a vigorous debate such as that between Swan (1985) and Widdowson (1985).

A strong communicative approach, in which leaner autonomy, authentic materials and negotiation of meaning in the target language were important, was proposed by Allwright (1984) and Breen (Breen and Candlin (1980)). However, in practice a weak version of the communicative approach became common, in which teaching material was pseudo-authentic, adjusted to the students' level, and bilingual vocabulary lists were produced to help the learners. Critics from the strong wing objected that the communicative approach was implemented half-heartedly and was thus ineffective: teachers merely added a few communicative activities while resolutely teaching grammar, maintaining "the structural knowledge-oriented framework" (Van den Branden et al, 2009, 5). Thus the communicative approach resulted in a continuum of applications, very much dependent on local circumstances such as the students' age, first language and ability level, ranging from strong to weak.

The beginning of task-based teaching

The communicative movement was partly about method (how to teach) and partly about content (what to teach). In the debate of the 1980s several different content, or syllabus models were proposed. The process syllabus, associated with Candlin and Breen (1980), involved a negotiation of the syllabus between students and teacher. The subject of study was no longer the language, but the language learning process: they advocated "a change of focus from content for learning towards the process of learning" (Breen, 1984, 52). A second school of thought was the procedural syllabus of Prabhu (1987) in which

lessons consisted of problem-solving. For Prabhu a task was “an activity with requires learners to arrive at a given outcome through some process of thought” (1987, 24). In contrast, Long and Crookes, the first major theorists of task-based language teaching, had a specific and non-linguistic definition for task. A task is not something you say, but something you do. “Tasks are the things people will tell you they do if you ask them and they are not applied linguists” (Long, 1985, 89). To make a task-based syllabus we first do a needs analysis of what our students need to do, rather than what they need to know. The resulting list of tasks is then divided into task types. The list of task types is the basis for pedagogic tasks, which are then put in a logical sequence to form a syllabus.

How do we sequence tasks effectively? The danger of TBLT is that tasks are completed while accuracy is neglected, so the result of this method becomes: “immediate communication rather than authentic interlanguage change and growth” (Skehan, 1996, 58). Skehan sets out a system by which the tension between form (accurate grammar) and meaning (completing the task) might be overcome. Each task must be analyzed in terms of its code complexity (grammatical difficulty), cognitive complexity (the amount of processing required) and communicative stress (time pressure or degree of importance). As for using tasks, Skehan suggests a procedure to be strictly applied: that before a task is attempted there must be sufficient preparation, perhaps with an element of grammar training. The task must be of appropriate level for successful performance. Finally, post-task activities can include tests, public performance or writing.

How do tasks differ from exercises? While in an exercise focus on form (linguistic accuracy) is primary, in a task focus on meaning is important. The goal of an exercise is to master the code (grammatical or vocabulary accuracy), while the goal of a task is the achievement of a communicative goal. Thus for example a typical exercise for elementary students of English takes this form: Insert the correct form of the verb *to be*

He ___ from Osaka. They ___ tall. I ___ a baseball fan

A task could be as follows:

Write down three questions beginning with *what where how or when* about vacations. Ask five students about their vacations Write the answers. Example “Where did you go?” Thus a task is designed to achieve a goal- in this case finding information- which will naturally involve a limited area of grammar (in this case using Wh- questions about the past). Exercises on the other hand are focused on the forms alone.

Designing tasks

What roles do learners play in tasks, and what benefits accrue from using tasks? Firstly a task is not any co-operative activity; clearly students can work together without doing a task. An example is reading a dialogue from a text book. This has many benefits in terms of pronunciation, intonation, vocabulary, grammar and idiomatic expressions, but cannot be called a task, because neither participant is changing the language in any way. Another activity that can be done in pairs does involve processing, and is equally valid as an exercise:

Student A Every day *I ride a bicycle*

Student B Yesterday *I rode a bicycle*.

Here there is comprehension and real processing, and it is thus a valid exercise or drill, but still not a task. Naturally we are the stage of learning the code, rather than achieving an outcome.

One important feature of a task as opposed to an oral drill or an exercise is that students must find something out. This can be real information, as in personal information about other students' families or preferences, or fictional information, as in games.

Pica and her colleagues provided a useful taxonomy of tasks (Pica et al 1993). In the course of performing a task a student can do three things: comprehend input, provide feedback and develop his or her language. The best type of task (assuming it is for two students) has four characteristics: Each student has some information which must be exchanged to complete the task. Both students must ask and answer. Both students have the same goal. Finally, only one outcome is possible. If any of these conditions are not met, then the task is not optimally stimulating growth in the students' language skills.

For tasks for pairs of students, Pica gives four categories: *jigsaw* "X and Y hold portions of a totality of information which must be exchanged and manipulated" (Pica et al 1993, 17). *Information gap* "one participant holds information that the other does not already know, but needs to know in order to complete the task" *problem solving* "a task oriented to toward a single outcome" *decision-making* "participants work toward a single outcome, but have a number of outcomes available to them" and finally *opinion exchange* or discussion, which is the least satisfactory type from the point of view of the three things that students must do.

To give an example of each type "Who is who?" picture puzzle is an *Information gap* task: two students have the same picture of many people, but only half the names are given, They must describe each person to elicit the names from their partner. An example of *problem solving* is the "Hotel theft" task in which one student takes the role of a hotel guest who has been robbed of all his belongings. He must

phone the other students to solve the problem. “Who gets the heart” is a *decision-making* task: students get information about six people who need a heart transplant, and must choose which person should get it. Finally “advice” is an *opinion exchange* task. Students in groups must write down five pieces of advice in priority order on some familiar topic, for example “How to get into the university you want.”

Using Tasks in the Classroom

So far we have seen that there has been considerable effort expended on the theoretical background of the task-based syllabus, and on the establishment of a taxonomy of tasks. But exactly how are tasks integrated into a lesson? Willis drew on her experience of classroom teaching to give a very practical set of guidelines for task use. She emphasizes that when learners are sure that they can work autonomously they become more confident, which is a great help to learning.

She divides the task cycle into two main parts, introduction and task. The task cycle includes the task itself, followed by planning and report. The introduction sets the scene for the task, ensuring that all students understand the goal. Additionally the teacher must provide the students with any essential vocabulary or grammar items necessary to accomplish the task. The students then do the task. At this point achieving the task goal is the priority, not linguistic accuracy. “The main focus is getting their meaning across” (Willis, 1996, 53). As a result another stage is needed, with the aim of achieving linguistic accuracy. This is the report stage, “where learners naturally strive for accuracy and fluency together.” The report can take several forms: a performance by each group before the class, or writing a short report and reading it out. Whichever method is chosen, planning time is needed. This is a vital stage, during which students think about their language.

The students therefore play a central role in accomplishing a task. However, the teacher’s role is also vital. The traditional image of a teacher is of a person who stands up and talks, but this is only one of the many roles of the teacher. The most fundamental one is as a manager of learning, and much of this management does not involve talking. In using a task the teacher’s role is to choose that task, introduce it (this is the traditional “teaching” part), but as soon as the students start doing the task, the teacher has to *monitor*, or observe the students without intervening. During the planning stage the teacher becomes a language adviser, helping students to improve their reports. Finally in the report stage the teacher is a chairperson, deciding who speaks next and providing a summary at the end. In this way the amount of “teaching” time is greatly reduced, while the proportion of class time in which students are working autonomously increases.

Task-based language teaching in a Japanese university

The above research comes from a wide variety of teaching situations: different class sizes, different target languages, different first languages, and different age groups. What relevance does it have to this author's situation, in a Japanese private university, teaching large groups of freshman students taking a mandatory English oral communication course?

The basic principle that students must receive as much comprehensible input, or English which they understand, is very important. For the sake of speed one is tempted to use the learners' first language too often, whereas there are many opportunities to use effective target language expressions, especially for often-repeated comments or instruction. For example, the teacher can repeatedly tell students to turn to a certain page, repeat a dialog in pairs and so on. As for using tasks to provide opportunities for negotiation of meaning, intensive practice with a specific vocabulary area or repetition of a certain grammatical form, this is a very useful idea. Especially in a 90-minute class, students need a period when they are not required to sit in their desks either listening or writing.

The essential features of a task for this level of student is that it must be easy to understand and relevant to the theme of the lesson. Thus for example one unit of the text Top Notch 1A (Saslow and Ascher, (2011)) concerns the topic of machines or technology, a very current theme in the age of the smart phone. There is a section on "suggesting a brand" so a relevant task is a survey in which each student is given a questionnaire survey print and a question of the form "What is your favorite brand of ___ ? Why? Each student must write an answer for each of the five interviewees. To make this feasible many steps are required. First, the students focus on the vocabulary of electronic devices, by doing a quiz in which they write the correct English for 10 common katakana words such as プリンター and スマホ. Then they practice a dialog in which someone recommends a brand of TV because it is *inexpensive*. This leads to a listening exercise, in the form of advertisements for unusual gadgets, on adjectives such as *convenient, affordable* and *portable*. Then the teacher hands out the questionnaire papers and explains the procedure, filling in a chart on the board to illustrate each step. Only when all these preliminary steps are completed are the students able to do the task with confidence.

At the start of the activity there is a period of quiet when nothing seems to be happening. Students are talking to each other, probably in their first language, checking what they have to do. At this point the teacher walks to the back of the class, so that students know that they will not be interrupted by an announcement. Additionally, if students glance to the front of the class, which is their natural tendency if they are not sure what to do next, they will see the sample interview chart on the board, and work out

what to do if they are unsure. A further help is a list of extra vocabulary at one side of the board, with expressions such as “has a good picture, has a big memory, has many functions”, so that when more than a single adjective is needed students have access to the correct phrase. After a few minutes the braver students have got out of their seats and walked over to another part of the class to ask their first interviewee, while others remain in their seats and ask the two or three students immediately next to them. Slowly the buzz of conversation grows. A short time later the teacher starts to walk round and check that all the students are writing down answers. Those who are slow are encouraged with phrases such as “Just three more answers.” Finally, when nearly everyone has finished, the teacher walks to the front of the class and writes a sample “report sentence”, for which space is left on the questionnaire sheet “Mr *Suzuki* likes *Sony music players* because *they have a good sound*.”

With a small group this can be followed by students reading out their texts, but with a larger group the teacher collects the papers and corrects them before the next class. To round off the lesson, the last 15 minutes are spent on a video activity. Two people are in an electronics store looking for a present, and describe many items. The students are supplied with the script, and have to fill in the gaps choosing from a list of adjectives.

This strategy ensures that the task is both enjoyable and effective. By putting a task at the end of several preparatory activities, the task is well prepared so that it is at the right level and useful in providing practice, while giving some room for individual variation.

The above sample lesson is certainly not an example of a task-based syllabus. The syllabus is based on themes with related vocabulary and grammar, and thus it could be criticized for being “knowledge based”. However, to the present author, teaching in a specific set of circumstances, it seems like a realistic and effective application of the task idea.

We have observed that TBLT emerged in the early 1980s out of the debate on language teaching, and has many different versions. It has been three decades of quiet growth, no mean achievement when several other trends of the 1980s proved to be short lived and are all but forgotten. Like the communicative approach it has proved to be a robust concept, which arouses support in many quarters. For example there are international conferences on TBLT, a wealth of publications, both journal articles and books, and considerable support among practicing classroom teachers. Accordingly, it seems realistic to suppose that its influence will continue to grow over the next thirty years.

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