CHAPTER 1

Introduction: From Theory to Practice in Task-Based Learning

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Task-based learning (TBL) is an approach to second/foreign language (L2) learning and teaching and a teaching methodology in which classroom tasks constitute the main focus of instruction (R. Richards, Schmidt, Platt, & Schmidt, 2003). A classroom task is defined as an activity that (a) is goal-oriented, (b) is content focused, (c) has a real outcome, and (d) reflects real-life language use and language need (for a review, see Shehadeh, 2005). The syllabus in TBL is organized around activities and tasks rather than in terms of grammar or vocabulary (R. Richards et al., 2003).

Why are many teachers around the world moving toward TBL? Why are they making the change to TBL? This shift is based on the strong belief that TBL facilitates second language acquisition (SLA) and makes L2 learning and teaching more principled and more effective. This belief is supported by theoretical as well as pedagogical considerations. In the first half of this introduction, we briefly summarize the various perspectives that have tried to account for how TBL can facilitate L2 learning. In all cases, we present the perspective proposed, the theoretical conclusions based on that perspective, and the way in which tasks are seen to facilitate learning from that perspective.

THE INPUT PERSPECTIVE

According to the input perspective, interaction provides learners with an opportunity to receive feedback on the level of their comprehension in the L2, which results in negotiated modification of conversation with their speech partners that leads to comprehensible input, which, in turn, is necessary for SLA (e.g., Krashen, 1998; Long, 1996). Likewise, negotiation serves to draw learners’ attention to the formal properties of the target language (i.e., to focus their attention on
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form) as they attempt to produce it. Learners’ noticing of and paying attention to linguistic form is also a necessary requirement for L2 learning (Long, 1998; Schmidt, 1998). Therefore, it can be concluded that negotiation of meaning and modification of input are necessary for L2 learning. How do tasks facilitate L2 learning according to this perspective? Research has shown that they provide learners with excellent opportunities for negotiating meaning, modifying input, and focusing on the formal properties of the L2 (e.g., Ellis, Tanaka, & Yamazaki, 1994; see also Ellis, 2003).

THE OUTPUT PERSPECTIVE

According to Swain (1995, 1998, 2000), learner output plays an important role in the acquisition process because it (a) forces learners to move from semantic to more syntactic analysis of the target language (TL), (b) enables them to test hypotheses about the TL, and (c) helps them consciously reflect on the language they are producing. All of which makes it possible for learners to notice a gap between what they want to say in the L2 and what they can say, which prompts them to stretch their current interlanguage capacity in order to fill the gap. This represents “the internalization of new linguistic knowledge, or the consolidation of existing knowledge” (Swain & Lapkin, 1995, p. 374). In other words, output presents learners with unique opportunities for active deployment of their cognitive resources (Izumi, 2000). Learner output is not just a sign of acquired knowledge, but also a sign of learning at work (Swain, 1998, 2000). Research has shown that tasks provide learners with an excellent opportunity to modify their output in order to make it more comprehensible (e.g., Iwashita, 1999; Shehadeh, 2001, 2003, 2004).

THE COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVE

The cognitive perspective on L2 learning stipulates that learner performance has three basic aspects: fluency, accuracy, and complexity. Fluency refers to the learner’s capacity to communicate in real time, accuracy to the learner’s ability to use the TL according to its norms, and complexity to the learner’s ability to use more elaborate and complex TL structures and forms (Skehan, 1998, 2003). These three aspects can be influenced by engaging learners in different types of production and communication. To do so, it is necessary to identify what task types, variables, and dimensions promote fluency, accuracy, and complexity in L2 learners and use them accordingly. These three aspects of learner performance are important for both effective communication (fluency and accuracy) and progress and development (complexity) of the L2 (Skehan, 1998).

Research has shown that task-based instruction can promote fluency, accuracy, and complexity in learners (Ellis, 2005b). For instance, if a teacher wants to promote fluency, he or she engages learners in meaning-oriented tasks; and if the
goal is to promote accuracy or complexity, the teacher engages learners in more form-focused tasks.

THE SOCIOCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

According to Vygotsky (Rieber & Carton, 1987), external activities that learners participate in are the main source of mental and cognitive activities. When individuals interact, their cognitive processes awaken. These processes, which occur on the interpsychological (or social) plane, include both cognitive and language development. The language development moves from the intramental plane to the intrapsychological sphere on the assumption that what originates in the interpsychological sphere will eventually be represented intrapsychologically, that is, within the individual. In other words, external activities are transformed into mental ones through the processes of approximation and internalization. With respect to L2 learning, this means that learners collaboratively construct knowledge as a joint activity. This co-construction of knowledge engages learners in cognitive processes that are implicated in L2 learning. Thus, social interaction mediates learning, as explained by Ellis (2000): “Learners first succeed in performing a new function with the assistance of another person and then internalise this function so that they can perform it unassisted” (p. 209), a process often referred to as scaffolding. Collaborative construction of knowledge in a joint activity is an important source of L2 learning.

Research has shown that tasks are successfully accomplished by learners as a joint activity and that this process of joint accomplishment indeed contributes to L2 learning (e.g., Lantolf, 1996; LaPierre, 1994). Also, studies have shown that jointly performed tasks enable students to solve linguistic problems that lie beyond their individual abilities (Swain & Lapkin, 1998).

THE RESEARCH–PRACTICE INTERFACE PERSPECTIVE

Tasks have attracted both researchers and teachers: Researchers use them as a research tool to collect and analyze learner data and learner language (so that they can make principled conclusions on how languages are learned), and teachers use them as a teaching tool. These two groups have worked pretty much independently in the past, with little or almost no cooperation. However, with TBL there are now more serious attempts to make pedagogical decisions to use tasks as a teaching tool based on insights gained from tasks used as a research tool (see, e.g., Ellis, 2003; Van den Branden, 2006b). With task-based learning and instruction, there is now more collaboration between researchers and teachers. In fact, tasks and TBL have brought researchers and teachers, and by implication, learning and teaching, closer together than ever before, which makes L2 learning and teaching more principled and more effective (see also Samuda & Bygate, 2008).
THE STUDENT AUTONOMY AND STUDENT-CENTERED INSTRUCTION PERSPECTIVE

Recent approaches to L2 teaching methodology emphasize student autonomy and student-centered instruction as effective ways of learning. This is because (a) students take much of the responsibility for their own learning; (b) they are actively involved in shaping how they learn; (c) there is ample teacher–student and student–student interaction; (d) there is an abundance of brainstorming activities, pair work, and small-group work; and (e) the teacher’s role is more like a partner in the learning process, an advisor, and a facilitator of learning than an instructor or lecturer who spoon-feeds knowledge to learners (see, e.g., Edwards & Willis, 2005; Mayo, 2007). Therefore, internally driven devices (e.g., self-noticing), as opposed to external techniques and external feedback (e.g., clarification requests), must be encouraged in the L2 classroom because strong empirical evidence suggests that internal attention-drawing devices are more facilitative of L2 learning than external attention-drawing techniques (Izumi, 2002; Shehadeh, 2004).

Task-based instruction is an ideal tool for implementing these principles in the L2 classroom. For instance, research has shown that task-based pair and group activities that are generated by students or are sensitive to students’ preferences ensure not only that students take responsibility for much of the work but also that students have greater involvement in the learning process. At the same time, such activities free the teacher to focus on monitoring students and providing relevant feedback (e.g., Shehadeh, 2004).

There is no wonder, therefore, that many teachers around the world are moving toward TBL; that task-based pair work and group work are now considered standard teaching and learning strategies in many language classrooms around the world; and that many publications, symposiums, seminars, colloquia, academic sessions, and even whole conferences are specifically devoted to TBL. The most notable of these is the formation in 2005 of an International Consortium on Task-Based Language Teaching (ICTBLT), which holds a biennial international conference on the topic.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE VOLUME

As stated earlier, TBL has brought researchers and practitioners closer together than ever before, and perhaps more so than any other L2 learning and teaching approach. This volume provides a new forum for these professionals to come even closer together and further explore the usefulness of TBL. Can tasks be used with learners at all levels? Is deeper restructuring of knowledge really taking place with TBL? How should task-based language courses be designed? How is the syllabus in TBL organized? What is the methodology of task-based teaching? How are learners tested in a task-based language learning and teaching context? How
should task-based language learning and teaching be assessed? The contribu-
tors to this volume provide answers to these and other questions based on their
application and use of TBL in various classroom contexts.

Given the practical emphasis of the volume and the growing interface between
practice and research, we believe that this volume will be of real interest not just
to practitioners but also to research students and SLA researchers worldwide,
who will get firsthand knowledge from practitioners and be able to evaluate their
theories and research in light of what happens in the classroom.

Innovative Applications

In this section, the contributors describe how TBL can be implemented in differ-
ent learning and teaching contexts and from different perspectives; how it can be
used for specific classroom activities, for a semester or a full academic curriculum;
and how it can be used with multilevel, mixed-ability students. In chapter 2,
Strong describes the development of a small-group discussion task with Japanese
English for academic purposes students and illustrates how to implement a single
task with a number of teachers and across several courses. In chapter 3, Herder,
de Boer, and Anderson demonstrate how an English as a foreign language dicto-
gloss task can be implemented from three different perspectives and in three
different contexts in Japan: a girls' private junior-senior high school, a private
language school, and a public junior high school.

In chapter 4, Limbu and Waller describe an innovative academic year curricu-
lum that encourages cooperating, building a sense of community, and developing
critical-thinking skills through content-based investigative tasks. Applying an
ethnographic methodology, in chapter 5 Reimann describes a task-based approach
to developing intercultural communicative competence and an increased sense of
cultural awareness, which prepares learners to engage in real-world language and
culture, pursue relevant and meaningful goals, and develop communication skills
and strategies.

Rosenkjar, in chapter 6, describes a literature-based lesson that demonstrates
how tasks can integrate focus on form with focus on meaning. In chapter 7,
Herrin proposes task-based templates for multilevel students. She describes three
such templates that can successfully engage students in speaking, reading, writing,
and listening by focusing on exchanging information, communicating, and under-
standing meaning rather than on practice of form.

Technology

This section examines how technology such as the Internet, video recording, and
music can be used to enhance learning and progress in the L2 in a TBL classroom
context. In chapter 8, Murphey and Sakaguchi describe a longitudinal project
in which students record video of their conversations and perform a variety of
related tasks. They demonstrate how this multitasked, longitudinal, and self-
evaluated recording allows students to become more successful and autonomous
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learners. Arena and Cruvinel, in chapter 9, explain how learners can easily be creators of content and how teachers can promote interaction in the TL through carefully designed tasks that lead to meaningful connections through collaborative projects using Web 2.0 tools. In chapter 10, Litsinger describes the Harmonica Project, which involved students in a nonlinguistic pursuit and resulted in language growth as well as improved classroom climate for her multilevel, mixed-grade, middle school English as a second language students, who had been accustomed to teacher-centered instruction and rote learning.

Evaluation, Testing, and Assessment

The chapters in this section address the most challenging issue for TBL: how learners are evaluated, tested, and assessed. In chapter 11, Dormer discusses how students in Brazil and Indonesia took responsibility for their own learning via a syllabus that incorporated self-evaluation. They learned how to monitor their own language acquisition as they pursued effective communication. Lanteigne, in chapter 12, describes a semester-long task-based teaching and assessment project in an undergraduate public speaking course at an English-medium university in the Middle East. She points out how well students can implement what they have been taught about audience awareness and audience analysis in their informative speeches.

In chapter 13, Yeh describes a blended task-based activity designed for intermediate- and advanced-level students in speech or oral training classes. She also presents the pedagogical framework and assessment tools used to evaluate student performance. In chapter 14, Winke explains how to use online tasks for formative language assessment, which is defined as assessment that is used in “evaluating students in the process of ‘forming’ their competencies and skills” (Brown, 2004, p. 6). She demonstrates how these tasks provide continuous feedback to the teacher and learners, and how this feedback can be used for making decisions about ongoing instructional procedures and classroom tasks.

All contributions are classroom based or classroom motivated, and all fall within the framework of TBL, broadly defined, and the perspectives to TBL outlined earlier. Similarly, all contributions are highly accessible to TESOL practitioners worldwide who come from a broad range of formal and informal educational settings that serve a wide range of language learners.

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