

Typology of Pedagogical Tasks

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Annotation: This article is devoted to the study of the Task-Based Language Teaching Approach, and it considers different perspectives and views of scholars on the “task”. The article also provides information on the types of tasks and their application in teaching foreign languages.

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The concept of “task” has been part of the field of education for a number of decades now. The idea of tasks as meaningful and useful activities is closely related to the principle of learning by doing, where students are encouraged to learn experientially (1) and put into practice and use what they learn. (2) Moreover, in a task-based approach what students do and learn should relate to their learning needs. (3) Long and Norris also say that TBLT comprises the entire language education process starting with a needs analysis from which target tasks are identified and grouped into target task-types, and from which, in turn, pedagogic tasks are developed and sequenced to form a language syllabus. Pedagogic decisions and materials being based on tasks, task performance also determines assessment practices. (4)

While the correct use of language is important and expected to emerge gradually, in TBLT the priority is being able to communicate meaning in a way that the intended message is understood despite learners’ limited knowledge of the language. D. Willis and Willis argue that one of the most valuable aims of TBLT is to give learners “the confidence and willingness to have a go, even if their language resources are limited”. (5)

In his book “Task-based Language teaching” David Nunan writes that pedagogically, task-based language teaching has strengthened the following principles and practices:

- A needs-based approach to content selection.
- An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language.
- The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation.
- The provision of opportunities for learners to focus not only on language but also on the learning process itself.
- An enhancement of the learner’s own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning.
- The linking of classroom language learning with language use outside the classroom. (6)

Within the literature, various definitions have been offered for “task” and it would be reasonable first of all to distinguish pedagogical task from target task. Long provides a real-world or target task definition. It is so called because it describes what the learner will do with language in the world outside of the classroom. Long describes it as a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for

others, freely or for some reward. Thus, examples of tasks include painting a fence, dressing a child, filling out forms, buying a pair of shoes, making an airline reservation, borrowing a library book, taking a driving test, typing a letter, weighing a patient, sorting letter, making a hotel reservation, writing a cheque, finding a street destination, and helping someone across a road. He also claims that “task” is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play and in between. (7)

There is a pedagogical task and David Nunan describes it as a task what learners do in the classroom to activate and develop their language skills. He believes although these tasks are designed for the classroom, there should also be a connection, however tenuous, to corresponding real-world or target tasks. It is particularly important that the students are able to see a connection between the work they do in the classroom, and the world beyond the classroom. (8)

Richards, Platt and Weber describe pedagogical tasks as an activity or action which is carried out as the result of processing or understanding language (i.e. as a response). For instance, drawing a map while listening to a tape, listening to an instruction and performing a command may be referred to as tasks. A task usually requires the teacher to specify what will be regarded as successful completing of the task. The use of various types 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. (9)

Jane Willis defines two types of a task: closed and open. As she says closed tasks are ones that are highly structured and have very specific goals, for example, *Work in pairs to find seven differences between these two pictures and write them down in note form. Time limit: two minutes.* These instructions are very precise and the information is restricted. There is only one possible outcome, and one way of achieving it. Most comparing tasks are like this. (10)

Open tasks are ones that are more loosely structured, with a less specific goal, for example, comparing memories of childhood journeys, or exchanging anecdotes on a theme.

Other types of a task come midway between closed and open. Logic problems usually have a specific goal and one answer or outcome, but learners have different ways of getting there. Ranking tasks and real-life problem-solving tasks have specific goals, too (e.g. to agree on a prioritized list or on a solution), but each pair’s outcome might be different, and there will be alternative ways of reaching it.

Open, creative tasks can still have an outcome for students to achieve. This could be to listen to each other’s anecdotes and then decide which one was the most frightening or dramatic. Because the range of learners’ experience is so wide, and the choice of anecdote is entirely up to them, the precise outcomes will be less predictable.

Generally speaking, the more specific the goals, the easier it is for students to evaluate their success and the more likely they are to get involved with the task and work independently. It is often the goal and outcome that provide the motivation for students to engage in the task, which then becomes for them a learning opportunity.

However, we must not forget that much interaction outside the classroom is not so directly goal oriented. In real life, people often talk just to get to know someone better, or to pass the time of day-there is a far greater proportion of experiential, interpersonal and openended talk. Our ultimate aim is to prepare students for this.

Tasks with specific goals are good ways of encouraging students to interact in the target language in the language classroom. If, however, some groups of learners begin to talk naturally amongst themselves in the target language even if they are disagreeing from the task goals, we should do everything we can to encourage it. If students are still working on a task, using the target language, long after the time limit you set, let them be. Their language development is more important than your lesson plan.

In India, Prabhu (1987) was one of the first to seriously explore this idea and organize a language-learning curriculum around a series of task-based projects (the “Bangalore Project”), which hinged on the basic hypothesis that people learn real and useful language more quickly if they try to use it for non-linguistic ends. (11)

Prabhu classified the tasks that he used in secondary school classes in Bangalore into three categories. (12)

- 1) Information-gap activities involving a transfer of given information from one person to another, or one place to another.
- 2) Reasoning-gap activities involving the discovery of new information through inference, deduction, practical reasoning, or a perception of relationships or patterns.
- 3) Opinion-gap activities involving the identification and expression of personal preference or attitude in response to a given situation.

Another typology of tasks was proposed by Pattison and he sets out seven task and activity types. (13)

- 1) Questions and answers.
- 2) Dialogues and role plays.
- 3) Matching activities.
- 4) Communication strategies.
- 5) Pictures and picture stories.
- 6) Puzzles and problems.
- 7) Discussions and decisions.

There is another typology of pedagogical tasks that has been recently proposed by Richards: (14)

Jigsaw tasks. They involve learners in combining different pieces of information to form a whole, for example, three individuals or groups may have three different parts of a story and have to piece the story together).

Information gap. These are tasks in which one student or group of students has one set of information and another student or group has a complementary set of information. They must negotiate and find out what the other party’s information is in order to complete an activity.

Problem solving tasks. Students are given a problem and a set of information. They must arrive at a solution to the problem. There is generally a single resolution of the outcome.

Decision-making tasks. Students are given a problem for which there are a number of possible outcomes and they must choose one through negotiation and discussion.

Opinion exchange tasks. Learners engage in discussion and exchange of ideas. They do not need to reach agreement.

In conclusion, pedagogical tasks are things that learners undertake in order to acquire language in instructional settings. Target tasks, on the other hand are things that people do in everyday life. For language learners, these also provide opportunities for language learning as well as language activation.

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