Where Tasks Fit In

Introduction

There has been much discussion in recent years about task-based language teaching (TBT hereafter). Accompanying this has been an amount of research done into the effects of aspects of tasks on their performance. But much of this work has taken place in something of a vacuum, and there has been relatively little discussion about what a general model of TBT would involve. For example, it is often unclear whether advocates of TBT are proposing a framework in which tasks are the only element. Is all the teaching task-based, or does some other form of teaching take place alongside it? Or perhaps TBT is intended for intermediate learners, and assumes that some other form of teaching has preceded, from the beginner level. Questions like this were often asked in earlier years about communicative language teaching (CLT) and notional/functional teaching, and it is only right that they should again be raised in relation to TBT. The result of this uncertainty about frameworks is that teachers may want to introduce an element of task--based work into their classrooms, but do not know exactly what role it will play alongside their 'normal' teaching. They do not know exactly where tasks fit in. This article has two aims. One is to consider some possible frameworks for TBT.[1] The other is to identify one framework as particularly worthy of further investigation.

One of the central notions utilized in this paper is the distinction between form-focus and message-(or meaning-) focus. This distinction has been important to nearly all discussions about TBT, and has indeed been an important one in much language teaching debate for two decades or so (playing as it does an important role in conceptualisations of CLT). In recent years there has been a growing amount of research into the actual role that form-focused work may play in language teaching (see for example Doughty & Williams 1998, Van Patten 1990 and Benati 2001). An activity may be said to be form-focused if the learner's atten-

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[1] The article is not intended as a thorough overview of the field, and some approaches, such as those like Van Patten's (1990) which attempts to focus on form in the input given to learners, are not discussed at all.

tion is drawn in some way to the necessity for accurate performance while undertaking the task. In a message-focused activity, the learner's attention is made to focus on the message that is being communicated – on the 'what' rather than the 'how'.

The Bangalore/Madras experiments

Though it is not always acknowledged, Prabhu may lay claim to being the 'father of TBT'. His approach (described in Prabhu 1987) was put into practice in the experiments which took place in Bangalore and Madras in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Prabhu's central theorem is that 'form is best learned when the main focus is on meaning [message--focus]'. It is the corollaries to this theorem that are particularly interesting. He argues that true message-focus is not compatible with the use of a language syllabus. So if learners are asked to recount what they did at the weekend, and the teacher truly means that to happen, the message-focus will be destroyed if at the same time the teacher requires them to use a particular tense. One might further claim that to do so is a form of dishonesty – the teacher pretends to be interested in the content of what the learners say when in fact the intention is to practise a particular piece of grammar. Dishonesty of this sort will certainly be picked up by the learners (who may or may not object to it). Arguments like this led Prabhu away from notional/functional and CLT, towards a task-based (or 'procedural') syllabus, where classroom activities are planned, and stated in a syllabus, but associated language is not. Hence Prabhu's approach involves tasks alone, without any form-focus. What he is advocating is 'message-focus all the way'.

It is worth noting that Prabhu's ideas have a psycholinguistic underpinning, being based on an implicit parallel being drawn between first (L1) and foreign language acquisition. Indeed, 'message-focus all the way' is (in general terms) what happens in L1 acquisition, and there are other aspects of Prabhu's approach which similarly mirror the L1 situation. Like most parents, Prabhu's teacher generally avoids drilling, and there is also no form-focused error correction. Similarly Prabhu's learner is allowed a major privilege also permitted to the L1 learner – the right to remain silent, until he or she is ready to produce.

Prabhu's work may lay claim to being one of the most interesting approaches to language teaching in recent decades. But to what extent may it be said to have been successful? My informal impression, based

on a number of visits to classes using the approach in Southern India, is that the outcome was precisely what Skehan (1992) and others predict would occur with such an approach – that it fostered the growth of a type of pidgin. So much importance was given to message focus that learners felt success was achieved when messages were conveyed, by whatever impoverished and inaccurate linguistic means. It might be argued that an element of pidgin is not problematic, again drawing a parallel with L1 acquisition. After all, the argument might go, a child's early L1 production sometimes has pidgin-like qualities, but these disappear over time. Hence an L1 child's **he goed* will eventually over time become *he went*, even though the erroneous **he goed* is understood by those listening to the child, and thus succeeds as a piece of communication. In other words, as the literature on fossilization attests (e.g. Selinker & Lamendella 1978), movement towards standard forms occurs, even though there is no basic communicative necessity for this to happen. Unfortunately Prabhu's experiment ended before there was opportunity to ascertain whether characteristics of pidgin would disappear; one might suspect that they would not.

Processing approaches

A second group of TBT approaches also has psycholinguistic underpinnings, but ones very different from Prabhu's. They are associated with the notion of information processing. One route by which this idea came from cognitive psychology into language teaching is through the work of Bialystok who (1982 for example) captures the insight that in order to assess proficiency in a language, one needs to ask not what the learners know in some abstract sense, but in what situations they can use what they know. A simple example: there are many learners who may be able to use the simple past tense correctly in a multiple choice language test, but who would get it wrong in a heated discussion about politics (for example). In this case there may be a level on which these learners 'know' the tense, but the useful question to ask is in what situations they can utilize that knowledge.

This type of variability, whereby a learner may produce a form correctly in one situation and incorrectly in another, can be accounted for by the notion of automisation. This is a central concept in the study of cognitive skills acquisition; Shiffrin & Dumais (1981, 111) describe it as ‘a fundamental component of skill development’. Through automi-

sation, the process of ‘making automatic’, skills which when first learned require much conscious attention gradually over a period of time become automatic such that eventually they can be performed without any conscious attention. So when a new linguistic form is introduced to learners, they will only produce it correctly when they can focus full attention on it. This is what occurs in the multiple-choice language test, where the learner has little to do but concentrate on form. But in the totally message-focused situation (the heated political discussion) the learner's full attention will be on understanding and expressing ideas. In this situation he or she may produce the same form incorrectly, until such time as it becomes sufficiently automatic not to need any attention.

One of the implications of this perspective for language teaching is that task grading – a notion not really present in Prabhu's framework – becomes of central importance. Long (1985, 93) characterizes this type of grading by describing it as: ‘determined by the degree of difficulty of the pedagogical tasks themselves (from simple to complex), as well as such normal considerations as variety, pace and duration. "Difficulty" here, however, does not mean difficulty in terms of the linguistic demands... rather it refers to the difficulty of pedagogical tasks in such aspects as the number of steps involved in their execution, the number of parties involved, the assumptions they make about presupposed knowledge, the intellectual challenge they pose... and so on.'

The perspective therefore suggests some kind of 'syllabus of tasks', in which there is a gradation of tasks, made in terms of task (as opposed to just linguistic) complexity. We do not as yet have many concrete ideas about what makes some tasks more complex than others, but research effort is being put into this area, and the result over time may be that a truly graded task-based syllabus becomes a reality. Skehan and Foster (1997) is an example of this kind of research.

One might argue that the central insight lying behind task-based approaches based on the notion of information processing has much to say to all language teachers, whatever framework they decide to work within. The insight is that a very great deal of effort will be required to automise structures such that they can be used by learners in any situation. It is an insight that was not taken into consideration in much language teaching of earlier decades (in audiolingualism for example), where structures, once practised in a form-focused way in isolation, were assumed to have been internalised and so available for instant deployment outside the classroom in natural conditions. Such transfer does not in fact happen so easily. This realisation may lead one to

believe that it is important, even vital, that all teaching programmes should have *some* task-based component to them. Tasks should be made to fit in somewhere.

But where exactly, and what else should there be? Should all teaching be task-based, with no other focus introduced before, during, or after tasks? In an important paper on the subject of TBT, Skehan (1996, 49) speaks of 'cycles of activity' focusing on different areas, one of which is grammatical accuracy, another fluency. But little hint is given as to how these components (particularly the one focusing on accuracy) would be organised.

Adding a form focus

One possibility would be to introduce an element of more form-focused language teaching into the framework. A programme might then have two components. In Component 1, language items could be introduced in a relatively 'traditional' way, perhaps following the sequence of a normal grammatical syllabus. Component 2 would consist of a series of message-focused tasks. For absolute beginners there may well be an argument for starting off with Component 1 alone, but at some point early Component 2 could be introduced, and after a further short while the two components could run side by side. At that stage one might have Component 1 teaching on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays (for example), and Component 2 task-based teaching on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

If such a solution were followed, it is an issue how the two components would relate. If it is regarded as important (as it surely should be) that Component 2 should have true message focus, rather than being form focus in disguise, then it is difficult to see any close relationship between the two components. Component 2 would not simply be the 'production' stage following the 'presentation' and 'practice' stages in Component 1. The tasks in Component 2 might be graded along the lines outlined in the Long (1985) quotation given earlier, and not closely in relation to the content of Component 1. In this two-component model, one might predict that slowly, over time, the language items taught in Component 1 would make their way through seepage into the tasks given to the learners. Component 2 would hence serve the important purpose of allowing automisation gradually to take place.

The notion of new language forms pervading the learner's use 'slowly, over time' resonates with contemporary views on how learning

takes place. The now-dated PPP model has new items taught, and immediately learned as a direct result of that teaching, in an incremental fashion. According to more recent thinking, there is a more indirect relationship between what is taught and what is taken up by the learner. There is no expectation that what is introduced in Component 1 on Monday should make an appearance in Component 2 on Tuesday.

A second possible strategy uses the idea of two components as above, but attempts (in Component 1) to teach language items in a way which has an information processing dimension. In this approach, the learner is gradually helped towards automisation by a progressive move from form to message focus. Johnson (1996) argues that this approach can be expressed by means of the formula *ra-1*. This stands for 'required attention minus one'. To explicate, one might imagine that a learner has ten units of conscious attention (to take a number at random); he or she has a channel capacity of ten.[2] When learners are first introduced to some new piece of grammar (the simple past tense for example), they need all ten units to produce it correctly, leaving no channel capacity remaining for anything else. At this stage, the teacher would utilise exercises that involve no cognitive challenge other than use of the new tense. However, after a short while the teacher would introduce exercises which involve the learners in some small extra cognitive challenge, enough to take up let us say one 'unit of attention'. The extra cognitive challenge might involve using additional unfamiliar language items, or having to think more about the non-linguistic content of the exercise. The learners now have only nine units of attention available for the simple past tense, which at that stage really needs ten. They are put under a small amount of pressure. Over time they will learn to cope with the tense utilising only nine units of attention to the tense. When the teacher sees this, some further cognitive challenge is introduced into the exercise, requiring two 'units of attention', leaving only eight for the simple past.

Such a strategy would work, then, by giving learners increasingly demanding activities, pushing them towards producing the tense with less and less channel capacity available. The formula *ra -1* captures this idea of constantly giving learners just one unit less than they require to do the task comfortably. In the end, if the strategy is suc-

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[2] It is important to realise that this figure is plucked out of the air simply to explicate. It goes without saying that the conscious mind cannot really be divided into units!

cessful, the learners reach the state where they can use the tense using zero units of attention. The tense will, in other words, be fully automated. In terms of the formula, one may say that automisation has occurred when, in relation to a given skill, $ra = 0$. To alter Prabhu's 'theorem' in a crucial way, it may be said that according to this approach 'form has been learned when it can be produced correctly when the learner's main focus is on meaning'. It is not 'message-focus all the way', but 'message focus as end product'.

Two versions of an activity (though admittedly it is more of an 'exercise' than a 'task') will illustrate the approach. They show very different degrees of message-focus (or 'form-defocus' as it is called in Johnson 1996). Figure 1 shows the basic activity:

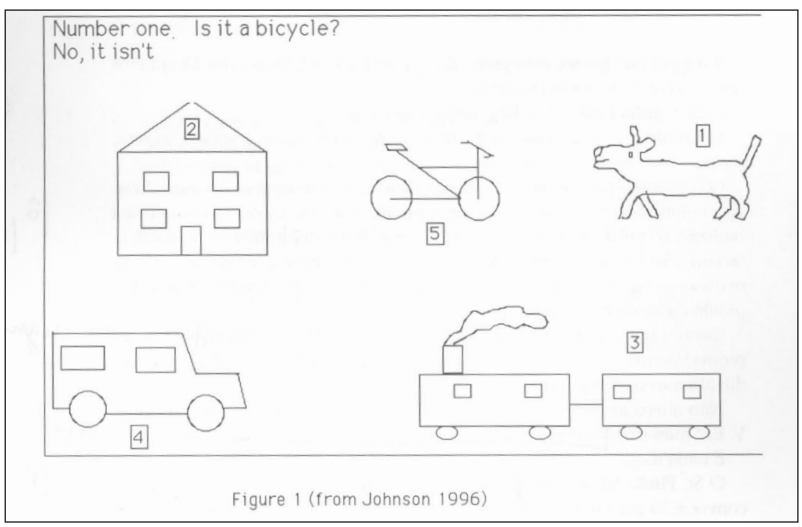

Figure 1 (from Johnson 1996)

In Version 1 of the activity, pupils work in pairs and practise questions and short answers with BE. For example:

P1: Number One. Is it a bicycle?
P2: No, it isn't.

P1: Number One. Is it a dog?
P2: Yes, it is.

This (highly tedious) exercise is entirely form-focused, with nothing for the pupils to focus attention on save correct formation of

the utterances. With both pupils looking at the pictures, the utterances are not informative; pupils are telling each other things they already know and can clearly see, and no challenge is involved.

Version 2 differs in appearance from Version 1 only in that the following instruction is added at the top of the page: *Look for one minute, then answer the questions*. The result of this small addition is a dramatic increase in the complexity of the task. The drill is now presented as a memory game, with pupils looking at the pictures only for a minute, then closing their books. The teacher (or one chosen pupil) then asks the questions. It is likely that all conscious attention will be put into the process of remembering, as opposed to the process of correctly producing the short answer form.

As regards an overall framework for language teaching, this approach suggests using a traditional grammatical syllabus, dealing with grammar points individually, in ordered succession. For each item there would be a series of activities gradually taking the focus more and more away from form, until *ra = 0* is achieved. At first these activities would be form-focused exercises, though as the degree of message focus increased they would become more recognisable as tasks. For many this strategy will have the advantage over Prabhu's strategy that it involves some systematic, form-focused teaching. Message focus may be the end product, but this is achieved from a form-focused starting point.

It needs to be asked whether this *ra-1* approach stand alone as a language teaching strategy. Johnson (1996) implied that it could. But there are two major difficulties with this. One has already been touched on, that it is too 'linear', suggesting too direct a link, too immediate an uptake, between teaching and learning. The second difficulty relates to the full-scale implementation of the approach. It is hard to imagine – unit-in, unit-out, for one language item after another – a series of engaging and varied activities that will move gradually from form to message focus, until *ra = 0* is achieved. To expect this would be to tax the ingenuity of the methodologist and teacher too far.

Both these difficulties disappear if we introduce into the framework a task-based Component 2. The *ra-1* notion can begin the process of automisation, but there needs to be a Component 2 to complete the operation.

Where tasks fit in

It was argued earlier that there is good reason for all language teaching to contain some task-based teaching, the reason being that transfer from form-focused practice to natural message-focused use will not occur automatically. But it is necessary to regard such teaching within a framework. The framework suggested here is one which has a component of language work, in many respects 'traditional', but in which there is a gradual movement away from form focus, following the *ra-1* principle. The second component contains nothing but message--focused tasks, graded according to principles of task complexity. These two components are combined together, possibly in different proportions according to learner level.

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