

USING TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING METHODS IN  
FOREIGN LANGUAGE FOR THE 1-4 FORMS

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**Annotation:** *tasks in everyday life are to be found everywhere. Tasks surround us from early in the morning till late at night. Washing our face is a task, as is preparing breakfast, going to work by car. Preparing a lesson, buying the newspaper, etc. Tasks pervade our lives, so much so that there is hardly an activity that cannot be called a task. When applied linguists and methodologists began using that word, they obviously relied in one way or another on the basic meaning it had in usual, plain speech. It is obvious that applied linguists were taking advantage of the semantic field covered by 'task', but at the same time they consciously or not- used the word restricting and adapting its meaning to concepts common to the field of language teaching learning.*

**Key words:** *learning dimension, unrestricted, object-regulated input, propositional syllabuses.*

The 'restricted' (pedagogical) or 'unrestricted' (real world) semantic content assigned to 'tasks' often leads to some confusion and misunderstandings. Regarding the features of real world tasks, the following set is suggested:

i) They are goal-oriented or goal-guided activities. Performance is evaluated depending on the achievement or not of the goal.

ii) They consist most of the time of a sequence of steps, well differentiated but tightly connected among themselves, mutually conditioned by the logical sequence of the actions preceding and following each one of the steps. Failure to fulfill one of the steps can invalidate the outcome of the task.

iii) The process and procedures applied in the fulfillment of the task condition the

effective and efficient achievement of the final goal, which is what really matters when we engage in a task. But procedures per se do not necessarily invalidate the attainment of the final goal.

iv) Tools needed and procedures applied vary depending on the goals we aim at.

v) The goal to be reached might be a problem to solve, but not necessarily.

vi) While performing the task, efficiency is closely connected to the level of attention devoted to it. Human beings, however, work with limited processing systems, so that if we concentrate on a specific area or topic, another one will probably be totally or partially abandoned.

vii) Tasks in real life are fully holistic: in their realization the whole person is involved:

mind and body, thought and action must be coordinated and work together.

When

coordination and cooperation is deficient, efficiency in task performance declines.

Do those features apply to pedagogic tasks?

Most authors on task-based methodology emphasize the dichotomy meaning vs. form (Breen (1984; 1987), Candlin (1984; 1987), Prabhu (1984; 1987), Long (1991) Ellis (2003)<sup>1</sup>, Skehan (1986; 1998 etc.). Such a dichotomy is specific to tasks when they are used in the classroom for teaching languages. In the case of real world tasks (making the bed, mending a skirt, etc.) such a dichotomy does not necessarily apply, but dichotomies of a different nature can be found instead. It has also often been mentioned that learning in a natural environment centres on meaning more than on form. Nowadays this is a distinctive label in modern second language acquisition research, although emphasis on content and meaning was already promoted and practiced by Gouin's method, by the Direct Methodists and by most defenders of 'conversational

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<sup>1</sup> Ellis, R., (2003). *Task-based Language Learning and Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

approaches (Sánchez 1997). Recent and specific research on the issue (Van Patten 1990, 1996) further confirms the importance of meaning-guided activities.

Prabhu and others initiated the Bangalore Project in 1979. At that time Prabhu affirmed: Communicative teaching in most Western thinking has been training for communication, which I claim involves one in some way or other in the pre-selection; it is a kind of matching of notion and form. Whereas the Bangalore Project is teaching through communication; therefore the very notion of communication is different. Prabhu~( 1980:1 64)

Prabhu's claim is revolutionary regarding synthetic or notional-functional approaches: you do not provide the learners with previously organized language materials to learn; you do not pretend to achieve specific communicative goals through activities previously designed and sequenced, but rather expect the learners to learn through the activities they engage in while using the language to carry out the task proposed. The process of communication itself is the means for learning to communicate. Acquisition of the formal system of language will take some time, but will be reached 'subconsciously' through the activation of an internal system of rules and principles by the learner. The condition to be met is that communicative practice must be carried out in a meaningful way (Krashen 1982).

There is therefore no syllabus in terms of vocabulary or structure, no pre-selection of language items for any given lesson or activity and no stage in the lesson when language items are practised or sentence production as such is demanded. The basis of each lesson is a problem solving or a task. Prabhu (1984: 273-6) Formal approaches define in advance what the learners must learn. The syllabus is regulated from outside. In a process approach assumptions are very different: learners regulate the process of learning by themselves, autonomously. And this self-regulating activity results in language acquisition, as it happens in a natural environment (learning of the mother tongue). Process approaches do not separate the object of learning from the process of learning. To do that when learning a second language would involve depriving the learners of applying their

previous experiences in language learning. That is rather the case of methods based on formal systems, in which new models (object-regulated input) are offered, while interactive activities are absent or adjust to formal patterns and become structurally conditioned. In order not to divorce the object and the process of learning, Prabhu (1987) expresses the need for 'enabling' procedures, that is operational ways and practices to reinforce the potential of learners not only to fulfill specific communicative needs in carrying out a task, but also communicative needs in the future when implementing different tasks. Working with tasks should allow learners to cope with unpredictable communicative situations. In fact, fulfilling a task should necessarily bring with it the development of the learner's cognitive abilities: this will automatically derive from the solution of the logical problems implied by the sequence of events inherent to tasks. When learning a foreign language, the means to perform the task is precisely the target language. The object and the process of learning converge in one single event, which is 'holistic' in nature: the process of (interactive) communication, the use of the suitable communicative elements in a genuine communicative situation and the strengthening of the cognitive abilities of the intervening individuals all come together in a unique communicative episode. In terms of syllabus design, tasks are fully inserted within a process syllabus, but they cannot get rid of discrete linguistic elements. How to solve the tension involved in bringing together and integrating both components is the main challenge of a task-based approach.

When performing a task in the real world, language is automatically limited: structures and words to be used will be restricted to the semantic field covered by the task. And so they are as well the logical steps underlying the fulfillment of the task. Gouins (1892)<sup>2</sup> series method and the logic of nature can be called upon here to illustrate the situation. The logic of 'cause and effect (any cause produces a specific effect and any effect is the result of a specific cause) pushes the task forward in a way that the learner can automatically and

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<sup>2</sup> Gouins, F., (1892). *The Art of Teaching and Studying Languages*

unconsciously detect. On the basis of this understanding of the ongoing process, the learner will be able to understand the language being used and carry out the task, occasionally with the help of his peers or the teacher (the outside world), finding the right words for the right things or ideas.

Breen (1987a) concludes that the TBA is a result of

- i) New views on language.
- ii) New views on teaching methodology.
- iii) New views on the contribution of the learners to the learning process.
- iv) New views on how to plan teaching and learning.

Points iii) and iv) deserve some comments. The role of the learner has been systematically left aside for centuries. And that has not only been the case in language teaching, but in all educational fields. Traditional education centred on the transmission of content, well defined and laid down by teachers or by the authorities. Not much else was added or considered regarding other elements also present in the teaching and learning situation. Research in language acquisition, among other reasons, has recently demonstrated what nowadays seems obvious: the most important element in the teaching-learning situation is the learner. The analysis of learning itself reveals relevant facts. Allwright (1984) concludes that learners do not necessarily learn what teachers teach, while sometimes they learn what teachers have not taught. And that is so in spite of admitting that class attendance has an effect on learning (Long 1983). What do learners do in the process of learning? And how do they do it? Answering those questions requires an in depth analysis of the participation of the learner in the process of learning. Research is still incomplete in this area, but it seems that individual and inherent capabilities of the learners prevail over external factors (say teacher, materials, syllabus) (Ellis 1985). Learners, consciously or not, systematically follow their own patterns of learning and manage to reprocess the input 'in their own way. Efficiency in teaching demands a careful reevaluation of the learner's role in the classroom.

Regarding point iv., new theories, methods or ideas on teaching abound. This is only natural if we take into account the exclusive prominence of teachers in the past. But if learners enter the scene, the process of learning must also be the subject of a more careful attention and analysis. Experience reveals that a careful definition of the syllabus does not result in the learning of such a syllabus. In other words, the syllabus taught is not necessarily equal to the syllabus learnt. The elaboration of syllabuses is no longer the work of amateurs. On the contrary, specialists in syllabus design are responsible for defining and refining syllabuses in the school system, which is no doubt a guarantee of their quality and adequacy. But apparently this is not enough to reach a satisfactory level in efficiency. Something must be there that hinders the achievement of the intended results in the teaching-learning situation. Perhaps the 'learning dimension ' should also be included in the definition of a syllabus, which would imply that formal teaching should no longer be the prevailing criterion conditioning syllabus design. Syllabus complexity is well illustrated in the literature of language teaching (see Dubin and Olshtein 1986, among others); what is taught (content) should perhaps be integrated with the way the content is taught (procedure). The way content and method, content and procedures are approached needs reconsideration.

If the way we teach has an effect on learning, process syllabuses have a role to play in language teaching. Contrary to the 'propositional syllabuses ' (based on the definition of structures, rules and vocabulary to learn), 'process syllabuses ' face the teaching situation from the opposite side: they focus not on what has to be taught, but on how things are done or how goals are achieved. Goals to be achieved are still there, but the means and skills to reach them are given priority in the analysis of the situation. It is assumed that if we perform the task adequately, the goals will be achieved more efficiently.

As a result, task-based not only offers immediate benefits in language acquisition, but also lays the groundwork for continued linguistic and cognitive growth. The application of task-based methods underscores the significance of creating a stimulating, nurturing, and effective language learning environment

that fosters a lifelong appreciation for language, cultures, and global communication.

In essence, the practical value of task-based methods for the 1-4 forms resides in their ability to shape a positive, effective, and enjoyable language learning journey, preparing young learners for ongoing linguistic fluency, cognitive enrichment, and intercultural understanding.

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