

TASKS IN LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS

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One current area of research in second language teaching is the examination of tasks from a number of angles. This study reviews descriptions and definitions of tasks as the basis for examining 100 tasks submitted by teachers to an edited collection for adult language learners. Questions are asked about ways of categorising the tasks, about their level of authenticity and about whether all the contributions fit current definitions of tasks. Finally, suggestions are made for organising collections of language tasks either for published volumes or for the filing systems of language departments.

Describing, defining and analysing tasks

There is nothing new in the idea of learners actually doing something during the lesson. "..... Dewey and Kilpatrick, writing in the first half of this century, had already laid the theoretical and practical foundations of learning by and through experience." Legutke and Thomas (1991, p. 157). Recently, though, more precise definitions have emerged. Richards, Platt and Weber (1985, p.289) speak of "an activity or action which is carried out as the result of processing or understanding language". Kumaravadivelu (1993, p. 79 ff) says that in completing a task learners focus on negotiating meaning by using all the language they have developed up to that moment. They are led up an open-ended path, but towards a predetermined goal. Skehan's (1996) definition also includes task completion as a priority to the degree that task performance is assessed in terms of outcomes. Also, he says, meaning is primary and there is some relationship to the real world. Williams and Burden (1997) summarise the features of tasks as input, activities and cognitive operations. Finally, in a summary of the literature, Ellis (forthcoming) points to seven "criterial features" of a task. It is a workplan, it involves a primary focus on meaning, participants select the language they need to accomplish the task, language behaviour is either authentic or contrived, both oral language and cognitive processes are involved, and the task has a clearly defined outcome.

While filing systems in languages departments often classify tasks according to their content or theme, editors of published collections look for more precise classifications. These need to be easy to access but innovative classifications give teachers insights into current research interests. Williams and Burden (1997) highlight five current issues in the literature on tasks, including how to grade and sequence them. A number of possibilities are suggested in the literature.

Kumaravadivelu (1993, p. 83) summarises four broad bases on which tasks have been analysed: communicatively, pedagogically, psycho-socially and integratively.

1. Communicatively, language learning tasks are treated as a rehearsal for behaviour outside the classroom.

2. Pedagogically, tasks provide teachers with a principled basis for planning language lessons. As van Lier (1996, p.205) expresses it, "a progression of tasks without some continuity or systematicity in terms of content progression (or coherence) would lead to a very disjointed, 'scattergun' syllabus". One obvious progression is level of difficulty, although this is not easy to assess without reference to a particular group of students. Two recent suggestions have been made for determining difficulty. Robinson (1995) distinguishes between tasks that concern the "here-and-now", where the objects and events being talked about are visible, and those relating to the "there-and-then", where they are not. He admits, however, that "...learner factors, such as confidence and motivation, will always be beyond the control of the task designer, and therefore can play little part in *a priori* decisions about task complexity." (p. 101). Skehan (1996, p.51 ff) has more complex principles to establish difficulty. Building on earlier work by Candlin and Nunan he considers three factors: code complexity (grammar and vocabulary), cognitive complexity (the content or the mental processing) and communicative stress (time pressure or having to write rather than speak).

3. A psycho-social perspective is interested in cognitive, expressive and social parameters that arise from negotiated interaction between participants. As one example of this perspective, the balance between the individual, the group and the theme is explored by Legutke and Thomas (1991). Another perspective, authenticity, is reviewed by Van Lier (1996), starting with Widdowson's (1979) distinction between genuine and authentic elements in tasks, where "genuine" describes any language sample not put together simply for language learning purposes and "authentic" or "inauthentic" refers to what the students are asked to do with the language. Van Lier gives the example of a newspaper article as genuine, but the task of conjugating all the verbs in the article as inauthentic.

4. Integratively, the other three perspectives are combined in a principled way. Tasks are said to "provide an integrated, internally coherent approach to ... program design, one which is compatible with current SLA theory" (Long and Crookes, 1993, p. 39).

The study

The present study is based on the researcher-editor's task of categorising 100 tasks for a published edition "New Ways in Teaching Adults" (Lewis, 1997). Of the approximately 120 tasks submitted by about 70 teachers, 100 examples were chosen for publication and these are the focus of the study. The main reason for rejecting the others was duplication (or near duplication). Each task had to be submitted under prescribed headings, which

included levels, types (of class) aims, class time, resources and procedures.

Three research questions are considered, the first being fundamental to compiling the collection:

1. Can all the contributions be defined as "tasks", according to the definitions provided in the literature?
2. What categories/divisions would best suit the published collection?
3. How authentic are the tasks, in the light of current definitions of authenticity?

Were all the contributions "tasks"?

The first research question was whether all the activities were "tasks" in the sense being used in the literature. The features mentioned in task definitions (referred to earlier) were identified and listed, even when they were mentioned by only one source. These included:

- a. language input
- b. learners determine the language they use
- c. oral language
- d. a set of procedures (workplan)
- e. focus on meaning / cognitive operations
- f. relationship with the real world (authenticity)
- g. a predetermined outcome

All tasks met criteria a, d and e or they would not have been selected for the book. There had to be language input, a set of procedures and a focus on meaning. Even Part VII, Non-verbal stimuli, required input from the teacher to organise the task. The question of authenticity is dealt with in a further question. This left three features which were worded as questions and then investigated.

1. Do participants select the language for carrying out the procedures? accomplishing the task? (b)
2. Is oral language involved?(c)
3. Are there clear outcomes? (g)

1. Do participants select the language for accomplishing the task?

This was measured by examining both the aims and the procedures of the tasks. A number of aims suggested that students were guided as to the language they should use, in which case the definitions outlined in the literature are not fulfilled. For example:

Produce a target structure

Review a particular grammar structure

Recognise and remember the difference between interrogatives

Practise prepositions of location

Practise question formation

Use fillers properly in conversation

However, even when the language to be used was suggested, the procedures showed that students were also expected to use spontaneous utterances. Whether individual students would perceive the emphasis to be more on form than on meaning cannot be measured out of context.

2. Is oral language involved?

This feature too was measured by examining the procedures. In one case, where the two aims were *Analyse features of good texts* and *Judge own texts* the actual procedures made no mention of speaking. However, the caveats and options suggested that it could be done as a paired task and that students should practise “saying their recount” to partners.

3. Are there clear outcomes which it is important to reach?

Contributions listed intended outcomes under the heading of aims. The numbered steps listed under “procedure” showed how these would be reached. What cannot be measured at the planning stage is the importance to the learners of reaching them.

Options for categorising the tasks

Two principles were determined in dividing the tasks into sections for the book.

1. The Table of Contents should combine originality with easy accessibility by the book’s readers.
2. Following the format of other books in the series, there should be several categories of reasonably similar size.

As outlined in the book’s introduction (Lewis, 1997), a number of possibilities were then considered.

One obvious division would be according to skills (reading, writing etc.). However, an examination of the supplied aims and procedural steps showed that many tasks took an integrated approach. Furthermore, other books in the series had already appeared for these divisions.

Some frequently used distinctions (information v. opinion gap, open v. closed outcomes) was also considered and could have been extracted from the procedural steps. However, this classification did not seem useful for teachers wanting to access tasks for a particular class. In addition, the idea had been used elsewhere.

Traditional levels of difficulty (beginners, intermediate, advanced and their sub-groups) were another possibility, using the task designers’ own judgments under the heading “level”. However, three problems presented themselves. One was determining the degree of commonality in labels such as “beginners”, “intermediate” and “advanced”, not

to mention those labelled "any" or "low intermediate+". Furthermore, many teachers added riders explaining that the activity could just as easily suit another level. The final reason against sorting by difficulty was Robinson's (1995) point about difficulty being created by the context.

The first detailed analysis was according to the task aims. Table 1 shows the results, using categories that arose from the data provided by the task writers.

<u>General language skills aims (86)</u>	
Speaking	33
Writing	15
Reading	14
Listening	12
Multiple	12
<u>Specific language focus aims (37)</u>	
Focus on form	18
Vocabulary development	16
Using specific genres	3
<u>Affective aims (23)</u>	
Classroom relationships	12
Contacts beyond the classroom	5
Beyond-class skills	6
<u>Content aims (21)</u>	
Culture	7
Information about the new country	7
Topics chosen by students	5
World and local news	2
<u>Learning strategies and communication strategies (15)</u>	

Table 1 : Summary of task aims

There are more than 100 examples, because multiple aims are listed for the same task when these were provided. By far the largest group, approximately two-thirds, were stated in terms of language, either as general skills or as a specific language focus. Strategies for learning or for communication were the smallest category. A later study (Basturkmen and Lewis, 1999) investigates the relationship between these intended aims and learners' perceptions of the tasks. Because many contributions had multiple aims, this classification was rejected.

The basis finally used for classification was “input data”, one of Nunan’s (1993) six components. Input data was defined as whatever the task writer provided as the means for starting the task. This resulted in ten sections with between six and fourteen tasks in each, as Table 2 shows. The left-hand number indicates the section in the book. There were ten types of input data, the most popular being “word prompts”, either oral or written on handouts, slips of paper, cards, or authentic printed material. Students in the class, as well as the teacher, might provide the prompts. Written texts, which could be seen as close to word prompts, were defined as a piece of connected discourse, whether prepared by the teacher or taken from another source.

Worksheets were differentiated from handouts (which could have been included in a number of other categories) in that worksheets implied students’ adding something of their own to the sheet of paper.

6.	Word prompts	15
3.	Written texts	14
7.	Non-verbal stimuli	14
8.	Task instructions only	11
2.	Academic material	10
1.	The news	9
4.	Direct teaching	8
5.	Worksheets	8
9.	Other people	6
10.	Case studies	6

Table 2: Types of input data.

Authenticity

The second research question, relating to the task’s authenticity/genuineness, was considered after the book had been published. There are two ways of measuring authenticity/genuineness. If we take Widdowson’s (1979) definition of genuine as being a language sample not put together simply for language learning purposes, then the analysis is straightforward. However, measuring authenticity, according to Widdowson, would also include examining the procedural steps to judge the genuineness of what students are being asked to do. Because this second aspect would be possible to judge only in relation to a particular group of students, authenticity is evaluated only in terms of the sources of input. In any case, the authentic-inauthentic distinction seems difficult to sustain. Who is to say that classroom behaviour is any less authentic than the behaviour we adopt when we eat out in a restaurant, or play with children or adapt ourselves in a hundred and one ways to the company we find ourselves in?

Sections 1, 2 and 9 of the book fell completely within the definition of authenticity, since

they were based on the news, on resources already in place for mainstream academic study rather than for language classes, and on people from outside the classroom. Between them these three sections accounted for 24 activities. Conversely, by dint of their definitions, none of the items in Parts 4 ("Direct Teaching"), 5 ("Worksheets"), 6 (Word prompts), 8 ("Task instructions") or 10 ("Case studies") could count as authentic. These five sections totalled 48 activities.

That left two parts to analyse case by case. Part 7 (Non-verbal stimuli) had 9 authentic and 5 teacher-made sources of input. In Part 3 ("Written Texts"), an analysis of the 14 tasks gave the following results.

Authentic	7
Not specified	4
Teacher prepared	3

Of the seven determined as "authentic", one was a set of scripts written earlier by the students and later typed up by the teacher.

In total, of the 100 activities in the book 40 could be described as authentic by the limited definition of the source of the input and 56 teacher-prepared, with 4 not specified. Why do only 40% of the tasks use "authentic" input data? Two possible reasons for the high proportion of teacher prepared materials come to mind. Perhaps teachers wanted to give something of themselves to a task being submitted for a collection labelled "New Ways". Perhaps it was difficult to find authentic material not covered by copyright and therefore suitable for an international publication.

Discussion and application for teachers

The organisation of the present collection of tasks parallels systems of classification in languages departments which teachers turn to for sources of fresh ideas. Typically, these collections grow and are added to by staff as they develop new tasks or adapt tasks from other sources. The question is, how should these files (and therefore this book) be organised? Forty years ago the answer would have been clear: classification would have been by grammar point. Thirty years ago it would have been by situation or by theme. In the 1970s filing systems were changed to accommodate the functional basis of language teaching: the language of polite requests, of asking for information and so on. Current filing systems (and published collections) have the chance to be more innovative. In the case of this book, the source of input was the basis for classification, but it remains to be seen how useful this is for classroom teachers. Further research could look for answers to this question by surveying users of the book. Another avenue for research could be to investigate forms of classification used for tasks in other published collections.

The question remains whether these 100 tasks are representative of what is happening in language classes around the world. Perhaps it can be assumed that since contributors

were asked to send ideas for an international collection, they would send something that they perceived as fresh, although many were apologetic about the "newness" of their contributions, wondering whether someone somewhere else in the world would consider them very familiar. A survey that asked teachers to record tasks used over a period of weeks could give insights into the pattern of tasks being used by classroom teachers.

In summary, the classification of tasks, whether in published collections of in-house filing systems has implications not only for all the concerns of researchers but also for teacher development. Exploring new ways of classifying them, helps teachers to view classroom learning in different ways.

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