The task-based approach: some questions and suggestions

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This article first addresses the question of what tasks are. It suggests that rather than accept the common 'communicative' definition, we should return to a broader definition and then focus on key dimensions that distinguish (from the learner's perspective) different types of task, notably degrees of task-involvement and degrees of focus on form or meaning. This approach helps us to conceptualize the complementary roles of form-focused and meaning-focused tasks in our methodology. It also shows the continuity between task-based language teaching and the broader communicative approach within which it is a development. Finally the article asks whether 'task-based approach' is really the most appropriate term at all for describing these developments in language pedagogy.

Introduction

According to the *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* (1995), a task is 'a piece of work to be done, esp. one done regularly, unwillingly or with difficulty'. The compilers of the 1989 edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* seem even less enthusiastic about the term: for them, a task is 'a piece of work imposed, exacted, or undertaken as a duty or the like', or 'a portion of study imposed by a teacher'. At first sight, then, 'task' seems an unlikely candidate to form the basis of a learner-centred pedagogy which aims to motivate lifelong learning.

When I first engaged in discussions of task-based pedagogy in Hong Kong in the early 1990s, the term 'task' held for me the same associations of unwillingness and imposition that one finds in these dictionary definitions, and for a long time I had an intuitive reluctance to use it. In current pedagogical discussions, however, it is as difficult to avoid the term 'task' as it once was to avoid the term 'communicative'. The task-based approach has achieved something of the status of a new orthodoxy: teachers in a wide range of settings are being told by curriculum leaders that this is how they should teach, and publishers almost everywhere are describing their new textbooks as task-based. Clearly, whatever a task-based approach means, it is 'a good thing'.

As earlier with the communicative approach, however, teachers and others are often not at all certain as to what a task-based approach really does mean. For example, does it mean that *everything* they do in the classroom should be a task? If so, what exactly *is* a task? Can teaching and learning grammar be described as a task, and if not, should teachers feel

guilty when they teach grammar? What is the difference, in any case, between a task-based approach and the communicative approach that they were told they should use not so many years ago? Some of this lack of certainty emerges from the articles by Bruton (2002) and Skehan (2002), to which the present article is partly a response. Bruton, for example, discusses tasks for eight pages, but admits (Note 1, p. 288) that the reader does not really know *what* he has been discussing, since 'the definition of task is an issue in itself', and therefore outside the scope of his article. Not ideal conditions for a meaningful discussion, one might think, but Bruton negotiates them valiantly! As a second example: Skehan describes task-based learning (p. 294) as partly a reaction to the 'outmoded' view that any aspect of language can be presented to 'the entire group of learners' in a class. But one of the key examples of task-based learning that he himself presents involves precisely this: in Samuda's (2001) study, after a 'pre-focus' group-work phase, there follows a 'language focus' stage in which a teacher introduces (first implicitly and then explicitly) new ways of expressing modality to an entire group of learners.

The initial problem is one of definition, and in this article I wish to suggest that matters may become clearer if we return to the everyday, non-specialist definition of 'task' that is reflected in the dictionaries. Within this definition, we can then focus on particular key dimensions of tasks which are relevant to language teaching, such as different degrees of task involvement and different degrees of focus on meaning. This will make it easier to conceptualize the complementary roles of form-focused and meaning-focused tasks in our methodology. It will also show more clearly the continuity between task-based language teaching and the broader communicative approach of which it is a development. We may then need to question whether the term 'task' is really such a useful part of our vocabulary for talking about language pedagogy at all.

What does 'task' mean?

Definitions of 'task' range along a continuum according to the extent to which they insist on communicative purpose as an essential criterion. Here are three points along the continuum:

- For some writers, communicative purpose is not an essential criterion at all. Williams and Burden (1997: 168), for example, define a task as 'any activity that learners engage in to further the process of learning a language'. Breen too, in his seminal article of 1987 (p. 23), included in his concept of task a range of learning activities 'from the simple and brief exercise type to more complex and lengthy activities such as group problem-solving or simulations and decision-making'. Estaire and Zanon (1994: 13–20) work with this broad definition but distinguish two main categories of task within it: 'communication tasks', in which the 'learner's attention is focused on meaning rather than form', and 'enabling tasks', in which the 'main focus is on linguistic aspects (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, functions, and discourse)'.

- Moving along the continuum, some writers do not go so far as to define tasks only in communicative terms but clearly think of them

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primarily as involving communication. Thus Stern (1992: 195–96) associates tasks with 'realistic language use' when he writes that 'communicative exercises ... provide opportunities for relatively realistic language use, focusing the learner's attention on a task, problem, activity, or topic, and not on a particular language point'.

- Moving still further along the continuum, many writers see the category of task as comprising only activities that involve communication. This is the position of Willis (1996: 23), in whose book 'tasks are always activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome'. Ellis (2000: 195) believes that this communicative definition now represents 'a broad consensus among researchers and educators'.

Ellis is one of several writers who adopt the term 'exercise' for any activity in which the learners have no communicative purpose. Thus Ellis's 'exercises' (in contrast to 'tasks') would correspond to Estaire and Zanon's 'enabling tasks' (in contrast to 'communication tasks').

Whether or not the more restricted communicative definition now represents a 'consensus', this consensus does not extend into the details of what the term does or does not mean. For example, in order to accommodate teachers' intuitions that learning can take place successfully when there is no assigned task, and students simply engage freely in discussion, the term 'task' may be extended to include such free discussion. Alternatively, in order to support the claim that task-based learning mirrors natural learning conditions, it has been claimed that it is through engaging in tasks that infants develop their mother tongue. But to many, extending the term to include spontaneous conversation and infants at play would imply that the concept itself has no limits, and therefore little meaning.

Two dimensions of tasks

Some of the difficulties just described may be avoided if we withdraw from the 'consensus' mentioned above, returning to the broader definition of the term and thinking then in terms of dimensions within tasks. Here I will consider two dimensions that are crucial to understanding tasks (now broadly defined). The first dimension is the continuum from focus on forms to focus on meaning, which underlies the definitions mentioned in the previous section. The second is the degree of learner-involvement that a task elicits.

Focus on forms and focus on meaning

It is along this dimension that we differentiate between tasks which focus on language forms and tasks which focus on the meanings that are communicated. This is not a dichotomy, however, but a continuum along which students may operate with differing degrees of focus on form and meaning. In the diagram below, this dimension is divided into five sections. The labels across the top describe the categories with reference to how they relate to the goal of language teaching, namely, communication.

Focus on forms		←	→	Focus on meaning
Non-communicative learning	**Pre-communicative language practice**	**Communicative language practice**	**Structured communication**	**Authentic communication**
Focusing on the structures of language, how they are formed and what they mean, e.g. substitution exercises, 'discovery' and awareness-raising activities	Practising language with some attention to meaning but not communicating new messages to others, e.g. 'question-and-answer' practice	Practising pre-taught language in a context where it communicates new information, e.g. information-gap activities or 'personalized' questions	Using language to communicate in situations which elicit pre-learnt language, but with some unpredictability, e.g. structured role-play and simple problem-solving	Using language to communicate in situations where the meanings are unpredictable, e.g. creative role-play, more complex problem-solving and discussion
'Exercises'	←	*(Ellis)*	→	*'Tasks'*
'Enabling tasks'	←	*(Estaire and Zanon)*	→	*'Communicative tasks'*

FIGURE 1
The continuum from focus on forms to focus on meaning

The activities described in Figure 1 are familiar, and the diagram requires little elaboration. At the extreme left of the diagram, *non-communicative learning* involves the strongest focus on forms. It includes, for example, uncontextualized grammar exercises, substitution drills, and pronunciation drills. As we move to the right into column 2, *pre-communicative language practice* still focuses primarily on formal features, but is also oriented towards meaning. An example of this is the familiar 'question-and-answer' practice, in which the teacher asks questions to which everyone knows the answer ('Who is sitting next to John?' and so on) but the student cannot answer without paying attention to the meaning of the words. With *communicative language practice* we come to activities in which learners still work with a predictable range of language but use it to convey information. These would include, for example, activities in which learners use recently taught language in order to conduct a survey amongst their classmates, or ask a partner for information in order to complete a table or picture. In *structured communication*, the main focus moves to the communication of meanings, but the teacher has carefully structured the situation to ensure that the learners can cope with it with their existing resources, including perhaps what they have recently used in more form-focused work. This category includes more complex information-exchange activities or structured role-playing tasks. Finally, at the extreme right of the continuum, *authentic communication* comprises activities in which there is the strongest focus on the communication of messages, and in which the language forms are correspondingly unpredictable, such as using language for discussion, problem-solving, and content-based tasks. Such tasks may develop into larger scale projects which contribute to students' personal and interpersonal development, as illustrated for example by the 'three generations' of tasks discussed by Ribé and Vidal (1993).

In terms of the twofold distinctions mentioned above, the five categories correspond to a progression from clearly defined exercises (or enabling tasks) to clearly defined tasks (or communicative tasks), passing though

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middle categories which possess features of both. Of course, since this is a continuum, the categories shade into each other, and five is merely a convenient number—we could distinguish fewer or more, according to our purpose. The distinction between 'tasks' and exercises', for example, uses just two categories. Or we could create even more than five categories by, say, further dividing 'authentic communication' along the lines suggested by Ribé and Vidal, according to whether the tasks aim to promote not only communicative development but also cognitive and personality development.

Task involvement

The second dimension is the learners' active personal involvement with the task, whatever the nature of that task may be. This is what Prabhu (1987) referred to as 'mind-engagement', and is implicit in Williams and Burden's words 'any activity that learners *engage in*' (my emphasis). It is of course a basic condition for all education that learners should be engaged (how else can they learn?) and this dimension is not specific to language learning. Accordingly, we can draw on a large body of general educational and psychological wisdom in exploring the conditions that stimulate it. In the field of language teaching, much work has been devoted in recent years to understanding more about motivation to learn (e.g. Dörnyei 2001) and the effects on this of, for example, affective climate, teacher response, task characteristics, and group dynamics.

This dimension is unproblematic in the sense that we know we should aim at as high a level of task involvement as possible. However, as every teacher knows, it becomes a major challenge as soon as we try to achieve that aim in the heterogeneous classroom situation.

The two dimensions combined

In Figure 2 the two dimensions are combined into one framework for characterizing the nature of tasks. The horizontal axis represents, from left to right, the continuum from focus on form to focus on meaning that was described in Figure 1. As we move upwards, the vertical axis represents increasing degrees of involvement ('mind-engagement') in a task. Thus learners may contribute a high degree of involvement to a form-focused language exercise (top left corner) as well as to a role-play or discussion (top right). On the other hand, an inappropriate exercise may produce only minimal involvement (bottom left), as may also an uninteresting discussion or role-play (bottom right).

	Focus on form ← ←	→ → Focus on meaning
Task	High task involvement Low focus on meaning (High focus on form)	High task involvement High focus on meaning (Low focus on form)
Involvement	Low task involvement Low focus on meaning (High focus on form)	Low task involvement High focus on meaning (Low focus on form)

FIGURE 2
Two dimensions in task-based foreign language learning
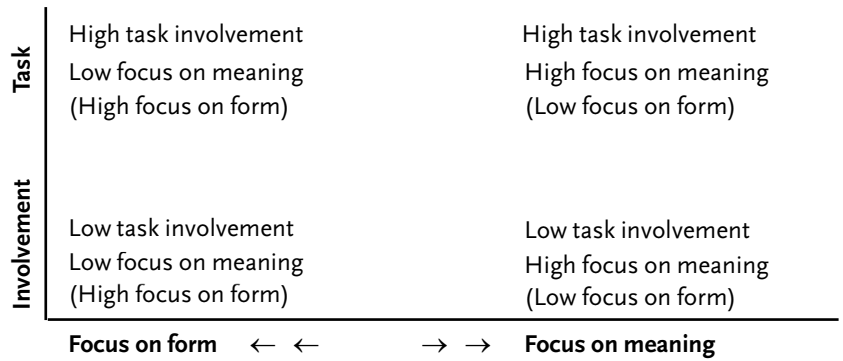
Although these dimensions are presented in Figure 2 as if they were properties of the tasks themselves, it would be more exact to say that they are properties of the learners as they engage in the tasks. For example, even though a teacher may plan and conduct a communicative language practice task with the intention of stimulating learners to work with a balanced focus on form and meaning (centre top in the diagram), some learners may focus almost entirely on the forms they are attempting to produce (top left), whilst others may focus entirely on getting their meanings across (top right). Some learners may lack involvement altogether, and be somewhere in the bottom section, towards the left or right, depending on how their limited amount of attention is distributed between form and meaning.

Task-based learning and the communicative approach

The continuum from focus on forms to focus on meaning (Figure 1) could equally well be taken as representing 'task-types' in task-based learning or 'activity-types' within the communicative approach. In this respect task-based learning can be seen as a development within the communicative approach. The essential feature of this development is that the categories of activity on the right of the diagram (structured and authentic communication activities or 'tasks') take on a more central role.

In a task-based approach (as usually conceived) they serve not only as major components of the methodology but also as units around which a course may be organized. These units provide a link between outside-classroom reality and inside-classroom pedagogy. At the interface with outside-classroom reality, communication tasks enable the course to be organized around 'chunks of communication' which reflect students' needs, interests, and experiences. At the interface with inside-classroom pedagogy, they provide an organizing focus for the individual components of language (structures, vocabulary, and so on) that students have to learn in order to communicate.

Take, for example, the task 'Qualities of a good friend' described in the Hong Kong *Syllabus for English Language (Primary 1 to 6)* (Curriculum Development Institute 1997):

Qualities of a good friend

Learners are required to think and talk about qualities and characteristics a good friend should have. On a list of characteristics given to them, learners number 5 of them in order of importance. Each

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learner then writes a poem to his/her good friend in class based on the chosen items on the list.

This task is part of a unit about 'Friends', which in turn forms part of a module about 'Relationships'. The hierarchy from 'module → unit → task' provides the interface with students' experience. At the classroom interface, the syllabus suggests (under the label 'objectives') a range of elements that students will need to learn in order to participate effectively in the communication, including vocabulary ('Words describing character and personality') and grammatical structures ('Use adjectives to describe people, e.g. She is *friendly*'; 'Use the simple present tense to talk about present states, e.g. She *cares* for others'). These elements could be taught before the students are asked to carry out the task, thus mirroring the familiar sequence of presentation → practice → production, or the students could first carry out the task and, as Skehan (2002: 292) puts it, 'themselves, because of the way they do the task, nominate the meanings they want to express' and therefore the forms they need to learn. Of course, this reversal of the standard presentation → practice → production sequence is also an option within other versions of the communicative approach (for example, it is suggested in Littlewood 1981: 87) but the use of tasks as units around which learning is organized makes the option more salient.

Is the term 'task-based approach' really useful?

If the task-based approach can be conceived as a development within the communicative approach, and the definition of a task is fraught with problems, and the term itself is unlikely to arouse enthusiasm outside language-teaching circles, we may ask why we use the term at all.

So far as the usefulness of the term is concerned, the situation with regard to the task-based approach is similar to the situation with regard to the communicative approach. As human beings, we feel a need to make sense of our world, and this process of making sense includes attaching descriptive labels to what we see and do. In the days of 'fixed methods', this raised no problems—when we used labels like 'audiolingual method' or 'direct method', these corresponded to easily identifiable bodies of principles and procedures. But now that the search for the right fixed method has largely given way to the search for 'a more flexible framework of principles and procedures' (Littlewood 1999: 664), there is no clearly defined entity to describe. Indeed, the act of describing may itself be misleading, since it may lead people to assume that the description captures a fixed set of meanings—perhaps even a prescribed set of procedures—that simply do not exist. The label 'communicative approach' has frequently misled people in this way, and there are signs that 'task-based approach' may do the same.

The logical step might be to dispense with labels altogether, but this would not satisfy our need to describe our world. So, amongst all the variability and flexibility, we must seek a common denominator and base our label on that, whilst doing our best to ensure that this label does not carry misleading prescriptive messages. Since the main common denominator of communicative and task-based approaches in their various forms is that, even when they use form-focused procedures, they

are always *oriented* towards communication, my own preferred working label (to cover both communicative and task-based language teaching) is 'communication-oriented language teaching', or—co-incidentally identical to the well-known classroom observation scheme—'COLT'.

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