

USING TASKS IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Outline

1. What is a 'task'?
2. Two ways of using tasks in language teaching
3. Evaluating a task
4. Final comments

What is a task?



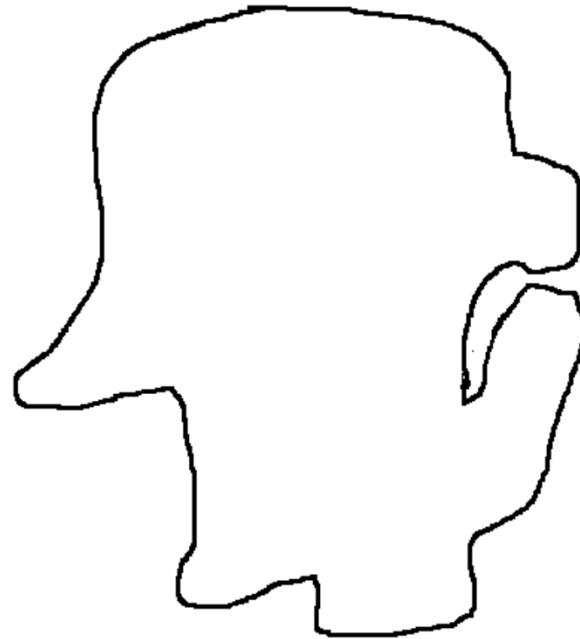
Four criteria

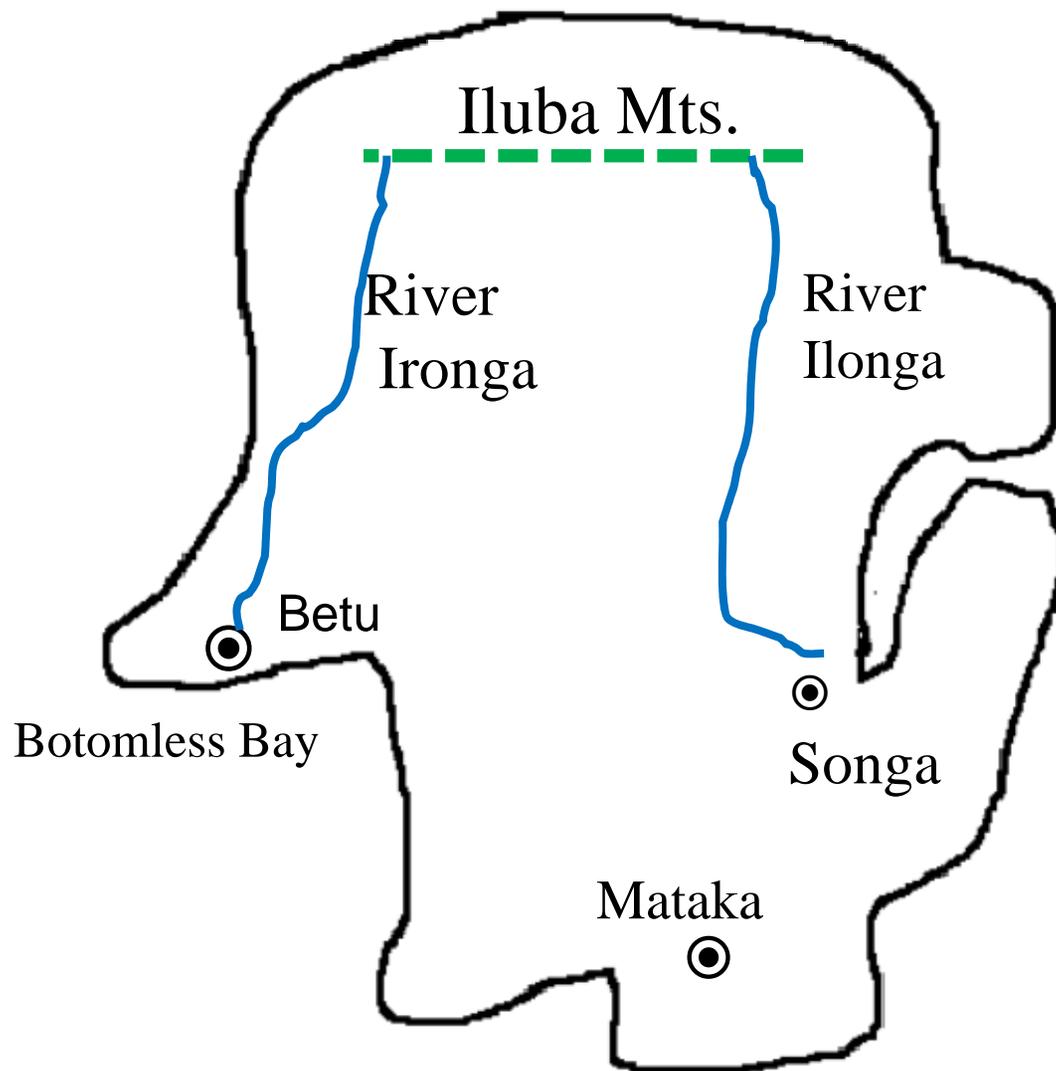
1. A task involves a primary focus on meaning.
2. A task has some kind of 'gap'.
3. The participants choose the linguistic and non-linguistic resources needed to complete the task.
4. A task has a clearly defined communicative outcome.

Map Task

Listen to the teacher's description of the island.
Enter these places on the map of the island.

1. Betu
2. Songa
3. Botomless Bay
4. Mataka
5. River Ironga
6. River Ilonga
7. Iluba Mts.





Comparing a task and an exercise

A task

1. Primary focus on trying to communicate
2. There is a gap
3. Learners use own linguistic resources
4. Successful performance = outcome of task achieved

An exercise

1. Primary focus on using language correctly
2. There is no gap
3. Text manipulating
4. Successful performance = accurate use of target feature

Going Shopping

Look at Mary's shopping list. Then look at the list of items in Abdullah's store.

Mary's Shopping List

1. oranges
2. eggs
3. flour
4. powdered milk
5. biscuits
6. jam

Abdullah's Store

- | | |
|-----------------|-------------------|
| 1. bread | 7. rice |
| 2. salt | 8. sugar |
| 3. apples | 9. curry powder |
| 4. tins of fish | 10. biscuits |
| 5. coca cola | 11. powdered milk |
| 6. flour | 12. dried beans |

Work with a partner. One person is Mary and the other person is Mr. Abdullah. Make conversations like this.

Mary: Good morning. Do you have any _____?

Abdullah: Yes, I have some./ No, I don't have any.

What Can You Buy?

Student A:

You are going shopping at Student B's store. Here is your shopping list. Put ticks next to the items on your list you can buy.

Mary's Shopping List

1. oranges
2. eggs
3. flour
4. powdered milk
5. biscuits
6. jam

Student B:

You own a store. Here is a list of items for sale in your store. Find the items that Student A asks for that you do not stock.

Abdullah's Store

- | | |
|-----------------|-------------------|
| 1. bread | 7. rice |
| 2. salt | 8. sugar |
| 3. apples | 9. curry powder |
| 4. tins of fish | 10. biscuits |
| 5. coca cola | 11. powdered milk |
| 6. flour | 12. dried beans |

Types of tasks

1. Real-life tasks vs. pedagogic tasks
2. Input-based vs. output-based tasks
3. Unfocused vs. focused tasks
4. Closed vs. open tasks
5. Here-and-now vs. there-and-then tasks

Suiting the task type to the learner

Type of learner	Type of task
Beginner learners	Pedagogic input-based tasks; closed; here-and-now tasks
Intermediate learners	Pedagogic input-based and output-based tasks; some focused tasks; mixture of pedagogic and real-life tasks; mixture of closed/ open and here-and-now and there-and-then tasks
Advanced learners	Mainly output-based tasks; focused tasks; real-life tasks; mainly open there-and-then tasks
Special purpose learners	Real-life tasks – input-based and output-based; closed and open tasks

Two ways of using tasks in language teaching

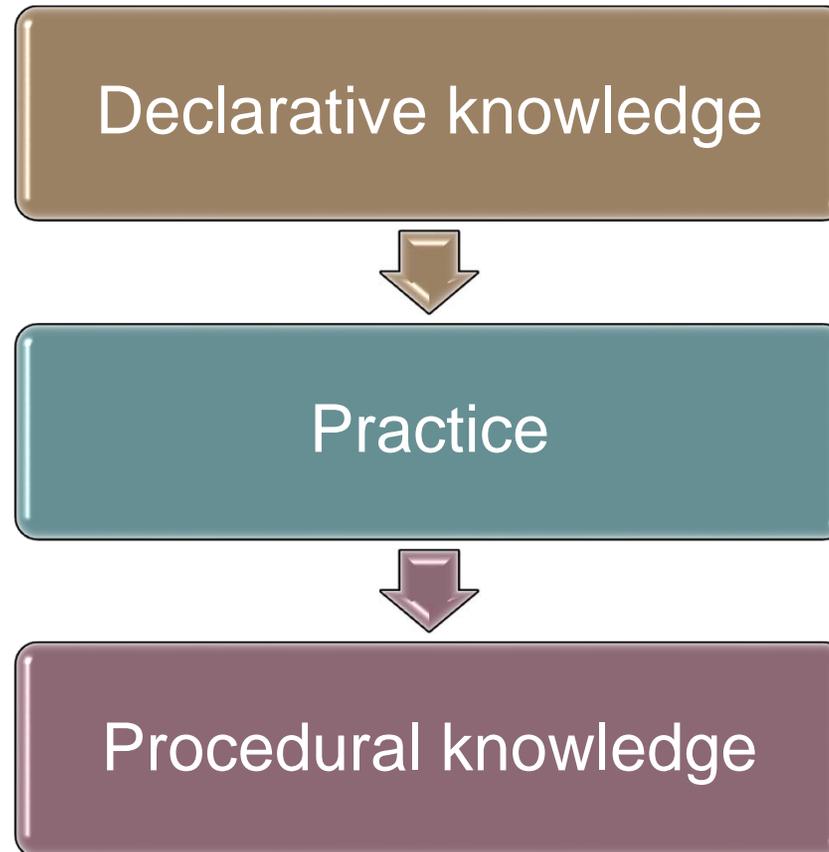


Task-supported teaching

Tasks can constitute the final step in a traditional present-practice-produce (PPP) sequence:

- A language item is first presented to the learners by means of examples with or without an explanation.
- This item is then practised in a controlled manner using 'exercises'.
- Finally a 'task' provides opportunities for using the item in free language production.

Skill-learning theory



Limitations of task-supported language teaching

1. It assumes a strong interface position (i.e. explicit knowledge is converted into implicit knowledge).
2. Learners may not be developmentally ready to acquire the target structure.
3. The task may result in conscious attempts to use the target structure rather than genuine communication.
4. It results in semi-automatized explicit knowledge rather than implicit knowledge.
5. Grammar is too complex to learn intentionally in this way.

Task-based Teaching

In task-based language teaching, tasks serve as the organizing principle for a course:

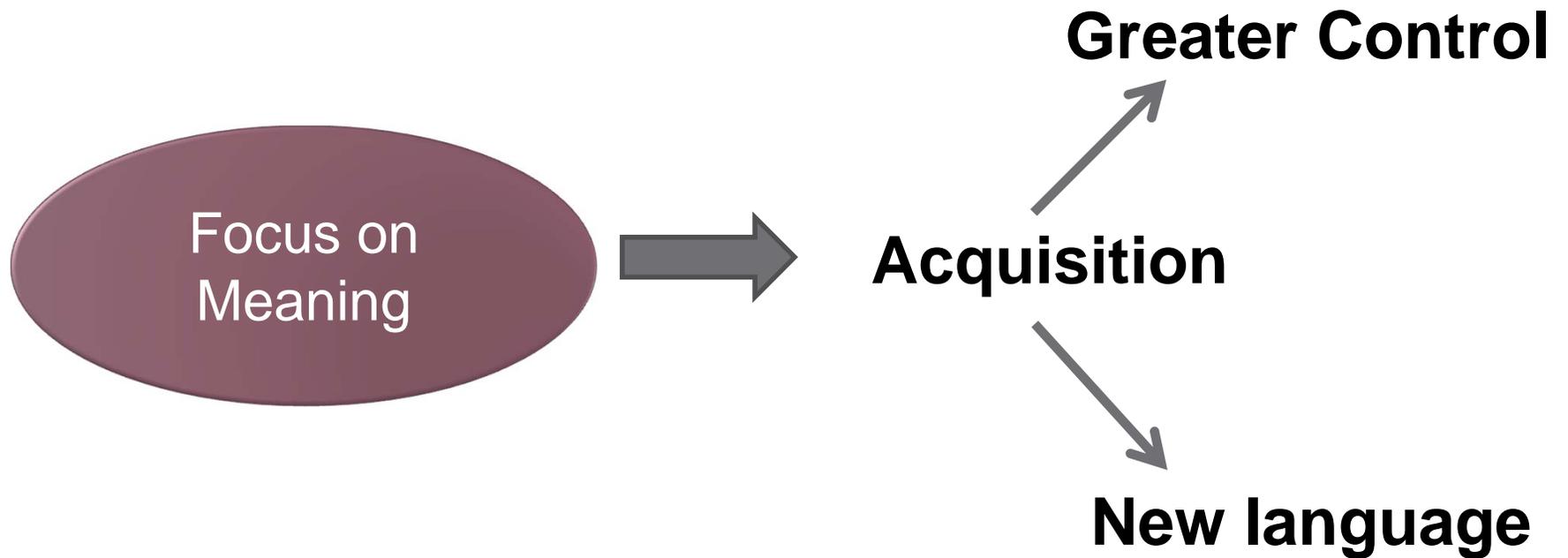
- The course consists of a series of tasks sequenced according to difficulty.
- The course can consist of a mixture of focused and unfocused tasks.
- The pre-task phase of a lesson can provide an opportunity for direct teaching – especially of vocabulary.
- Meaning is primary but attention to form is achieved through the way a task is designed and how it is implemented.

Incidental acquisition

Task-based teaching caters to incidental language acquisition – i.e. learners ‘pick up’ new language while they are working to achieve the outcome of the task.

In this respect it differs from task-supported teaching which caters to intentional language acquisition.

Incidental Acquisition



Focus on Form

Incidental language acquisition requires that learners pay attention to form while they are performing a task.

Teachers can facilitate attention to form in a number of different ways:

- By highlighting features in the input of an input-based task.
- By providing opportunities for learners to plan before they perform a production-based task.
- Interactionally when learners experience problems in understanding or expressing themselves clearly or fail to use the L2 correctly.

An example of focus on form

Learner: He pass his house.

Teacher: He passed his house? (= recast)

Learner: Yeah, he passed his house.



Advantages of task-based teaching

1. Learning incidentally through communicating results in implicit knowledge.
2. It facilitates learning through the simultaneous development of interactional competence in the L2.
3. Students are more likely to develop intrinsic motivation in a task-based approach.
4. A task-based approach enables teachers to see if students are developing the ability to communicate in an L2.

Evaluating a task

- Excellent
- Very good
- Good
- Average
- Poor

Does a task 'work'?

This involves investigating:

- whether students enjoyed doing the task and found it useful
- the extent to which the task results in the type of learner behaviour that the teacher had in mind when selecting or designing the task
- whether the task contributes to the students' acquisition of the L2.

Approaches for the micro-evaluation of a task

Approach	Evaluative criteria	Data collection
Student-based	Motivation ('Were the students motivated when performing the task?')	Self-report – rating slips; questionnaire; interviews; post-task written commentary.
Response-based	Performance ('Do the students perform the task in a manner intended by the design and implementation of the task?'; 'Are they successful in achieving the task outcome?')	Transcriptions of audio and video recordings of students performing the task; observation check lists. Documentary record of task outcome.
Learning-based	Development ('Is there any evidence that learners have acquired some new language or achieved greater control over their existing L2 resources?')	Uptake-charts (Slimani, 1989); pre- and post-tests; transcriptions of audio and video-recordings examined over the duration of the task.



An example of a task evaluation

Sharon Whippy's task evaluation

The task

1. Pre-task

This was an input-based task. Students were given a map and listened to directions. They had to draw the routes on their map. They could request clarification if they did not understand.

2. Main task

Students worked in pairs. Each student had the same map but with 6 different locations marked on it. They took turns describing the routes they took to get from one location to the another and their partners drew in the routes they described. They were given 15 minutes to complete the task.



Students

11 intermediate level students from a variety of countries.

The English Language Academy of the University of Auckland.

Aims of the task

1. Were the students able to use their own linguistic resources to describe the routes on the map?
2. Were the students able to deal with communication problems when these arose?
3. Were they able to complete the task successfully?
4. Did the students enjoy the task and find it useful for their learning?

Data collection

Approach	Type of data
Student-based	Questionnaire about different aspects of the lesson. Completed at the end of the lesson
Response-based	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Audio-recordings of the students as they performed the task; transcriptions prepared.2. Completed maps.

Student questionnaire

1. I think doing map direction tasks is helpful to my learning.
2. I think working in pairs helps me to practice my spoken English.
3. I think the way we did the task motivates me to carry out the task.
4. I think the task was enjoyable and fun to do.
5. I think the time limit for the task encouraged me to speak more fluently
6. I think the pre-task helped me to do the main task.

Sample interaction (1)

S1: Ah now to say this? (pointing at traffic light symbol on map)

S2: So go ...

S1: No no no this one

S2: I don't know

S3: I don't know

S1: (to teacher) How to say this?

T: traffic lights

Sl: traffic lights

Sample interaction (2)

S1: go south along the High Street

S2: along

S1: go south go to go to south

S2: south?

S1: south s-o-u-t-h

S2: ah yeh yey yeh yeh south

Analysis

1. Interactions analysed for evidence that students were able to negotiate for meaning when a communication problem arose.
2. Interactions analysed for evidence of 'pushed output'
3. Quantitative analysis of the students' responses to the questionnaire.

Results (1)

- Most of the students agreed that the task was useful and fun
- They all found the pre-task activity helpful
- They approved of the time limit set for the task
- One student, however, was negative about the task

Results (2)

- There was some confusion about how to complete the task (e.g. some pairs did not draw in the routes on their map until the teacher reminded them).
- All the pairs were able to complete the task successfully.
- The pairs differed in the time it took them to do the task and the number of turns they produced.
- Comprehension problems were addressed mainly by confirmation checks.
- Students had problems with each others' pronunciation.
- There was little evidence of 'pushed output'.
- Some students requested assistance from the teacher.

Whippy's conclusions

1. It was clear that the students responded to the task in different ways.
2. Setting a time limit had little overall effect.
3. In general, though, the students demonstrated 'staying power'.
4. The tasks did result in interactionally authentic language use.
5. The task resulted in very short, simple turns.

Improving the task

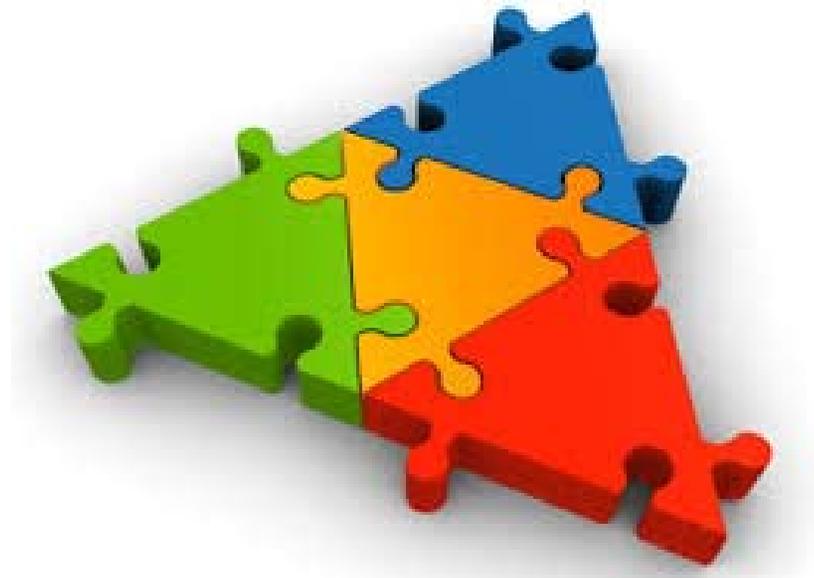
1. Some initial vocabulary input would have helped the students – e.g. how to pronounce street names.
2. Giving more planning time might have resulted in more complex language use.
3. A different discourse mode (e.g. story telling) may be needed to elicit more complex language.

Final Comment

Whippy commented:

It has been a huge learning process undertaking an evaluation such as this as a teacher and as a researcher. Through evaluating the task what has become apparent is the myriad of factors that influence learner language development, from task design and implementation through to psycho-cognitive and sociocultural elements. Probably the most important point is the importance of the processes a learner goes through in acquiring an L2.

Conclusion



Final Comments

1. Instructional programme can consists of a mixture of task-based and task-supported language teaching.
2. Tasks help students to activate their L2 knowledge in communication (i.e. to develop interactional competence).
3. Tasks also help students to acquire new vocabulary and grammar.
4. Using tasks in the classroom requires teachers to adopt a different role from traditional teaching (i.e. they have to become 'performers' and 'assistants' rather than 'knowers').
5. Effective use of tasks involves ensuring that they are at an appropriate level of difficulty for the students.
6. For tasks to be effective students needs to be primarily focused on meaning but also focus on form when the need arises.