



DOING TASK-BASED TEACHING WITH BEGINNER LEVEL LEARNERS

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SCOPING MY TALK

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- Early L2 acquisition
- Classroom studies involving input-based tasks
- Designing and implementing input-based tasks
- Conclusion



INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

A COMMON CRITIQUE OF TBLT

A common critique of task-based language teaching (TBLT) is that it is not suitable for beginner-level learners.

- Swan (2005) claimed that beginner level learners “urgently need a simple grammatical repertoire” (p. 394).
- Bourke (2006) – “a task-based syllabus presupposes that pupils already have a working knowledge of the second language” (p. 284)
- Littlewood (2007) argued that learners need to be taught some language before they can take part in a task.

A MISCONCEPTION

This critique assumes that TBLT necessarily involves production based tasks (e.g. speaking).

But TBLT can also include input-based tasks (i.e. tasks involving learners listening or reading).

TBLT is possible with beginners but only if it is recognized that it does not have to involve learner production.

AN EARLY DEFINITION OF TBLT

Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics :

... any activity or action which is carried out as the result of processing or **understanding** language (i.e., as a response). For example, **drawing a map while listening to a tape, listening to an instruction and performing a command**, may be referred to as tasks.

(Richards, Platt, & Weber, 1985, p. 289)



EARLY L2 ACQUISITION

IMPLICIT LEARNING

Implicit learning is the default process – it is how we learn our first language - and, although it weakens with age, it is still the principle way all learners can acquire an L2.

TBLT – especially with learners - aims to tap into this natural capacity for implicit learning.

THE INITIAL STAGE IS A RECEPTIVE ONE

Learners process the input they are exposed to and start to build and store form-function mappings.

During this period learners may attempt to speak but often, especially in the case of children, they go through a silent period.

HOW LEARNING TAKES PLACE RECEPTIVELY

Learners do not need grammar to understand input.

They utilize the fundamental **pragmatic capacity** of every language user – the ability to relate what they hear to the situation in which it occurs and thereby to understand what is said even if they do not know any of the words in an utterance.

- the Here-and-Now Principle
- “fast mapping” (Clark, 1993)

CHUNK LEARNING (N. ELLIS, 1996; 2002)

- Learners start by picking up chunks from the input they exposed to – combinations of sounds in words and combinations of words in formulaic expressions such as “I don’t know” ,“Can I have a ___?”,“I want a ___”.
- Gradually they discover the component parts of these chunks and abstract linguistic schemata emerge out of well-established associations.
- The resulting ‘grammar’ is not rule-based but becomes rule-like.



CLASSROOM RESEARCH INVESTIGATING INPUT-BASED TASKS

Study	Tasks
Ellis, Tanaka and Yamazaki (1994)	Kitchen task – listening to directions about where to place objects in a picture of a kitchen.
Ellis and Heimbach (1997)	Bugs and Birds Tasks – listening to descriptions of bugs and birds and to directions about where to place them on a board.
Ellis and He (1999)	Apartment Task – listening to or producing directions about where to place items of furniture in a matrix picture of the apartment
Shintani and Ellis (2010)	Three tasks – Help the Zoo and Supermarket; Help the Animals; Listening Bingo Game
Erlam and Ellis (2018)	Bingo Game; Bingo Moche (indicating whether a statement was positive or negative); Shopping Task; Cool or Not Task

INPUT-BASED TASKS

Listen-and-do tasks – tasks that require learners to listen to directions or descriptions and to demonstrate their understanding by performing some action.

Focused tasks

The tasks in all the studies were designed to incorporate pre-selected vocabulary or grammatical features. In this way, it was possible to investigate whether performing the tasks led to the acquisition of these features.

SUMMING UP

- Even complete beginners are able to comprehend the input and to acquire new language productively.
- Input-based tasks are more effective than traditional production-based instruction activities (i.e. PPP) with beginner-level learners.
- Input-based tasks can result in discourse similar to that found in naturalistic settings.
- Input-based tasks afford learners the opportunity to engage actively with the new language.



DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING INPUT-BASED TASKS

DEFINITION OF INPUT-BASED TASKS

Criteria	Input-based tasks
There must be a primary focus on meaning	They require learners to comprehend the input provided by the teacher and also afford opportunity for students to signal their non-understanding.
There is a 'gap' of some kind that motivates the exchange of information or opinions.	Opinion gap tasks are too difficult in the early stages of a task-based course so for beginner learners information-gap tasks are needed.
Learners have to rely on their own linguistic and non-linguistic resources in order to complete the task.	Beginners lack L2 linguistic resources but they can exploit non-linguistic resources by relating what they hear or read to what they can see.
Learners are primarily engaged in achieving the outcome of the task.	The outcome is invariably non-verbal (i.e. it involves performing an action of some kind).

A



B



C



D



E



F



Teacher's descriptions

1. She is wearing a suit.
2. She has red shoes.
3. Her hair is yellow.
4. She is holding a camera.
5. She is wearing a yellow top.
6. Her dress has no sleeves.



DESIGN

CHOICE OF TOPIC

The topics in the research studies were kitchen utensils, bugs and birds, apartment furniture, a zoo and a supermarket, and clothes. In each case, the topics were chosen by the researchers on the assumption they were suitable for the students.

A preferred approach, however, might be to consult learners to find out what topic areas they are interested in.

NON-VERBAL DEVICES

A great variety of non-verbal devices are possible:

- Geometric shapes
- Pictures
- Photos
- Maps
- Diagrams
- Videos
- Making a model

TASK COMPLEXITY

The challenge that a task poses to learners will depend on the level of detail in the non-verbal device and, therefore, the language that needed.

The Picture Task involves pictures of six different women who differ on a number of dimensions – age, hair style and colour, clothes, ethnicity, and what they are doing. Potentially, therefore, this task is quite challenging as it will involve words for all these dimensions. The task could be simplified if the pictures were distinguishable on just one or two dimensions – e.g. a short boy, a tall boy, a short man, a tall man.

CHOICE OF LINGUISTIC FORMS

The choice of linguistic forms should reflect the learners' stage of development:

The materials writer can exploit the pictures in different ways – e.g. focus on the words for clothes and colours – *purple top, red shoes, blue pants* – or focus on the actions the women are performing – *pointing a finger, taking a photo, holding her hands*.

To teach a specific grammatical form, the materials need to be designed accordingly:

For plural-s Shintani (2016) designed the materials to include cards depicting single animals and objects (e.g. one squirrel; one battery) and pairs of objects (e.g. two squirrels; two batteries), forcing the learners to listen carefully to decide which card to select.

VERBAL INPUT

Two approaches:

1. Leave teacher free to experiment with the language she chooses, observing how the learners respond to what she says and making appropriate online adjustments to suit individual learners.
2. Prepare a script which teachers can follow when performing the task. For example for the Picture Task, the script might be as follows:

Write the letter of the woman with a yellow top.

Write the letter of the woman with red shoes.

Write the letter of the woman with yellow hair etc.

TASK OUTCOMES

The outcomes of tasks for beginners will take the form of learners' responses to the input with each response either right or wrong.

It would be helpful if the teacher can see how the task as a whole was performed. This is possible with the Picture Task, which requires students to write the letters of the pictures the teacher describes. The teacher can easily check how well the learners did by looking at their answer sheets.



IMPLEMENTATION

TASK PREPARATION

Task-based lessons, whether involving input or output-based tasks, often have a pre-task stage where learners are prepared for the main task.

- pre-teach key words.
- Give the learners the pictures and ask them to find the words they will need.
- Pre-teach the grammatical structure that is the focus of a task (but runs the danger of losing the ‘taskness’ of the task).

USE OF THE LI

The aim of input-based tasks is to expose learners to the target language. For this reason, the teacher should make maximal use of the target language and minimal use of the learners' LI.

There is, however, a case for the teacher making selective use of the LI (e.g. translating a key word if students fail to understand it).

INPUT MODIFICATION

Irrespective of whether the teacher is provided with an input script or creates her own script as the task evolves, there is a need for the teacher to pay close attention to the learners' responses as these will signal whether she needs to **adjust the input** to help them comprehend.

Some strategies:

- Repeat a verb stimulus
- Shorten a verbal stimulus
- Use emphatic stress on the key word in the verbal stimulus

INPUT ELABORATION

As well as simplifying input, the teacher needs to be on the look-out for opportunities to elaborate it.

Task-essential language – the input language that is needed to perform the task.

Task-optional language - additional language that helps to facilitate learners' understanding.

FOCUS ON FORM

Focus-on-form “overtly draws students’ attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication” (Long, 1991; 45-46).

It is an essential feature of task-based teaching.

Two important points:

- the need for the learners to persist in negotiating until they understand.
- the teacher’s use of a variety of strategies to draw attention to form,

AN EXAMPLE

1. Teacher: Okay, next one. Please take the toothbrush.
Toothbrush.

2. Student 2: One?

3. Teacher: Toothbrush. One toothbrush, two toothbrushes.

4. Student 2: Two?

5. Teacher: No, no, no. Toothbrush, toothbrush.

6. Student 1: (Indicating two with fingers) two-thbrush?

7. Teacher: Not two. One toothbrush.

8. Student 2: Eh? One, two, brush?

9. Teacher: No, no (indicating 'one' with fingers) toothbrush.
One toothbrush. Ready, ready? Three, two, one. Go. One
toothbrush.

10. (All students show correct cards).

(Shintani and Ellis, 2010, p. 632).

Student requests confirmation

Teacher contrasts singular and plural forms
using numerals

Student requests confirmation

Teacher replies and repeats singular noun.

Student requests confirmation

Teacher replies – uses numeral and singular
noun.

Student asks question

Teacher replies and repeats singular noun
with gesture.

All students demonstrate understanding.

FEEDBACK

With output-based tasks, focus-on-form typically involves corrective feedback (i.e. feedback directed at showing learners they have used a linguistic form incorrectly).

With input-based tasks, feedback functions differently:

- Its main function is to let the learners know whether they have successfully understood the input stimulus.
- A secondary function is to inform the learners whether their guesses about the meaning of the input stimulus are right or wrong.

TASK REPETITION

Shintani (2016) asked complete beginners to repeat the same tasks 9 times over a five week period. She reported that:

- over time she reduced her use of the LI, her utterances became longer and she elaborated the input more.
- the learners' use of language also changed - their output increased as they became familiar with the tasks.
- The learners' comprehension improved over time so they could see that they were learning.
- The children remained motivated in performing the tasks throughout.

Task repetition is powerful option with young children but with older children (e.g. secondary level) it may be less effective. A general principle is to avoid repeating once the task becomes easy.



CONCLUSION

DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING INPUT-BASED TASKS

Design variables	Implementation variables
Choice of topic	Task preparation
Non-verbal devices	Use of the LI
Choice of linguistic forms	Input modification
Verbal input	Input elaboration
Task outcomes	Focus-on-form
	Task repetition

MOVING TO OUTPUT-BASED TASKS

An important question is when and how to start introducing output-based tasks.

The obvious answer is to delay until the learners have started to try to speak.

One effective strategy for making the switch is to ask students to first complete an input-based task and then try a related output-based tasks. In other words, the input-based task becomes a preparation for the output-based.