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Task-based Language Teaching

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Introduction

In 1976, Wilkins distinguished between two types of syllabi—synthetic syllabi and analytic syllabi. Synthetic syllabi comprise linguistic units: grammar structures, vocabulary items, functions, etc. The units are usually ordered logically, in a sequence from linguistic simplicity to linguistic complexity. It is the learners' responsibility to synthesize the linguistic units for the purpose of communication. Analytic syllabi, on the other hand, '... are organised in terms of the purposes for which people are learning language and the kinds of language performance that are necessary to meet those purposes' (Wilkins 1976: 13). Content-based instruction, which we looked at in the previous chapter, employs an analytic syllabus. Rather than learning language items one by one in a specific sequence, learners work on relevant content texts and the language of the texts. Second language acquisition (SLA) research supports the use of analytic syllabi because such research shows that learners do not learn linguistic items one at a time. Instead, they induce linguistic information from the language samples they work on, and they acquire language items only when they are ready to do so. A task-based syllabus, which we take up in this chapter, falls into the category of an analytic syllabus. The syllabus is composed of tasks, not a sequence of linguistic items. Tasks are meaningful, and in doing them, students need to communicate. Tasks have a clear outcome so that the teacher and students know whether or not the communication has been successful. An example of a task in a task-based syllabus is for students to plan an itinerary for a trip. Students work in small groups with a train schedule. They are given certain destinations to include, and they have to decide on the most direct route to travel by train—the one that will take the least amount of travel time. As the students seek to complete the task, they have to work to understand each other and to express their own thoughts.

Principles 1 The teacher tells the class that they are going to complete a timetable. The class activities have a perceived purpose and a clear outcome. 2 The teacher begins by having the class help him to fill out a class schedule. This is done through whole class interaction in the form of teacher question and student response. A pre-task, in which students work through a task that they will later do individually, is a helpful way to have students see the logic involved in what they are being asked to do. It will also allow the language necessary to complete the task to come into play. 3 The teacher first has the students label the time periods and then the days. The teacher breaks down into smaller steps the logical thinking process necessary to complete the task. The demand on thinking made by the activity should be just above the level which learners can meet without help. 4 The teacher asks the students if a particular answer is right. The teacher needs to seek ways of knowing how involved the students are in the process, so he can make adjustments in light of the learners' perceptions of relevance and their readiness to learn. Such teacher–class negotiation ensures that as many students as possible in a mixed-ability class grasp the nature of the activity. 5 The teacher asks, 'What about Saturday? Do we have school on Saturday?' The teacher doesn't consciously simplify his language; he uses whatever language is necessary to have students comprehend the current step in the pre-task. Here he switched from an abbreviated Whquestion to a yes/no question. This switch is a natural strategy that proficient speakers use when interacting with less proficient speakers inside and outside of the classroom. 6 The students reply, 'Weekend.' The teacher responds, 'Yes. Saturday is on the weekend. Saturday's a weekend day.' The teacher supplies the correct target form by reformulating or recasting what the students have said. 7 The teacher talks about the schedule. The teacher provides good models of the target language. 8 The students then do the task in groups, following the teacher's instructions. They are each given some of the information they need to complete the task. This jigsaw task, where students have to piece

together information they need to complete a task, gives them an opportunity for interaction. 9 They make errors. The teacher notes them. The teacher should not necessarily interrupt the students when they are focused on meaning. 10 The students' papers were marked for content. Students should receive feedback on their level of success in completing the task. The need to achieve an outcome makes students pay attention. 11 Students are asked to design a way to survey the other students about their favorite and least favorite subjects. They are to figure out a way to report their findings to the rest of the class. Students have input into the design and the way that they carry out the task. This gives them more opportunity for interaction.

Reviewing the Principles We will now follow our customary procedure and review the answers to our 10 questions. 1 What are the goals of teachers who use TBLT? The goal of teachers is to facilitate students' language learning by engaging them in a variety of tasks that have a clear outcome. 2 What is the role of the teacher? What is the role of the students? The teacher's role is to choose tasks, based on an analysis of students' needs, that are appropriate to the level of the students and to create pre-task and task follow-up phases that are in line with the abilities and needs of the students. The teacher also monitors the students' performance, and intervenes as necessary. The role of the students is to communicate with their peers to complete a task. 3 What are some characteristics of the teaching/learning process? A pre-task phase typically begins a task sequence. During this phase, a teacher can introduce the students to the language they will need to complete the task. The tasks are meaningful and relevant so that the students see the reason for doing the task and can see how the task relates to possible situations in their lives outside the classroom. Students are actively engaged with the task, with the teacher monitoring their performance and intervening when necessary. The task has clear outcomes so that both students and teachers can tell if the task has been successfully completed. A post-task phase takes place to reinforce students' learning

or to address any problems that may have arisen. 4 What is the nature of student–teacher interaction? What is the nature of student–student interaction? The teacher is the input provider during the initial phase of the lesson. He also sets the task for students to perform. The teacher pays attention during the task, making note of language that should be focused on. He provides feedback such as recasts. Students often work closely together to help each other accomplish the task and to problem-solve. 5 How are the feelings of the students dealt with? Students are motivated by doing tasks that prepare them for the real world. 6 How is the language viewed? How is culture viewed? Language is for communicating and for ‘doing.’ Culture is not explicitly dealt with although certain tasks might have a cultural focus, such as when students prepare different ethnic foods to share. 7 What areas of language are emphasized? What language skills are emphasized? The meaning dimension of language is emphasized. Depending on the nature of the task, any of the four skills can be utilized. 8 What is the role of the students’ native language? There is no explicit role for the students’ native language. 9 How is evaluation accomplished? The teacher constantly evaluates students in light of task outcomes and the language they use.

Reviewing the Techniques Prabhu identified three types of tasks, all of which were represented in the lesson we have just observed: an information-gap, an opinion-gap, and a reasoning-gap task. •

Information-gap Task An information-gap activity, which we saw used previously in CLT and now in TBLT, involves the exchange of information among participants in order to complete a task. In the TBLT lesson, students had to exchange information within their groups in order to complete the schedule. Other examples might be where one student is given a picture and describes the picture for another student to draw, or where students draw each other’s family trees. • **Opinion-gap Task** An opinion-gap task requires that students express their personal preferences, feelings, or attitudes in order to complete the task. For

instance, students might be given a social problem, such as high unemployment, and be asked to come up with a series of possible solutions, or they might be asked to compose a letter of advice to a friend who has sought their counsel about a dilemma. In our lesson, the students were only at the advanced-beginning level. Their opinion-gap task was a rather simple one, which involved students' surveying their classmates about their most and least favorite subjects.¹

- Reasoning-gap Task A reasoning-gap activity requires that students derive some new information by inferring it from information they have already been given. For example, students might be given a railroad schedule and asked to work out the best route to get from one particular city to another, or they might be asked to solve a riddle. In the lesson we observed, students were asked to use the results of their surveys or interviews to find out which were the three most popular and the least popular subjects. Prabhu (1987) feels that reasoning-gap tasks work best since information-gap tasks often require a single step transfer of information, rather than sustained negotiation, and opinion-gap tasks tend to be rather open-ended. Reasoning-gap tasks, on the other hand, encourage a more sustained engagement with meaning, though they are still characterized by a somewhat predictable use of language. According to Ellis (2009), TBLT tasks can be unfocused or focused:

- Unfocused Tasks Unfocused tasks are tasks designed to provide learners with opportunities for communicating generally. The task described in the introduction to this chapter, where students have to plan an itinerary for a train trip, is an example. Students draw on their own language resources to fulfill the task.
- Focused Tasks Focused tasks are tasks designed to provide opportunities for communicating using some specific linguistic item, typically a grammar structure. The task of trying to identify the owner of a briefcase left in a taxi is an example. Of course, there is no guarantee that the task will elicit the grammar structure that the task designers intended (Loschky and Bley-Vroman 1993). As with all tasks, focused tasks should be meaningful.