Task as a basis for syllabus?

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Abstract

This is a critique of some proposals for task as a unit in syllabus design. The weaknesses of the unit begin with the enormous range of definitions, many of which are too inclusive to be useful. In addition, the task proposals suffer from limited empirical validation and vague learning procedures, substituted by the social negotiation of preferences. Three basic orientations are isolated for syllabus design, with additional methodological variables. All of these would need to be clarified and validated much more than has been the case up to now. Task-based syllabuses as they have been developed are shown to offer nothing new on the one hand and considerable confusion on the other.

Two recent articles in TESOL Quarterly (Nunan, 1991; Long & Crookes, 1992) give the impression that the task is resolving many issues in course design, and that there is a growing consensus in the profession towards the widespread use of the task as a unit of analysis/ planning in the form of task-based syllabuses. I would question both these assumptions and argue that really the proposed task-based syllabus is nothing more than a compromise between the communicate-to-learn and the learn-for-communication positions. What is not in question is the positive pedagogical role of tasks in general.

1. Task

The weaknesses of task as a basis for syllabus begin with the enormous range of definitions. Those definitions which include all classroom activity are so general as to be redundant, and cannot be used to characterize any particular mode of planning. The more specific definitions resort to either contrasting sub-categories of task based on purpose, such as learning - communication, or goal-oriented activity categories that contrast with task, such as exercise or project - see Murphy (1993) on these differing definitions. Apart from the latter positions not offering anything new, what distinguishes syllabuses using the sub-categories is precisely what distinguishes the categories themselves! For task-based syllabuses to be a genuine and distinct alternative for pre-planning language learning, they would have to include only specified types of activity, defined as tasks, which had been shown to be psycholinguistically valid. Furthermore, they would have to allow for reasonably concrete criteria for formative evaluation.

There are further truths about pedagogic tasks. The more open-ended (interactive) communication tasks usually give instructions as to the intended outcome/ product not the psycholinguistic processing, where the latter is usually the pedagogic reason for

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selecting the task, although this might not be (intentionally?) apparent to the learner. So, we need to be aware that task-based learning, as it is often defined, includes activities disguised for product learning. In fact, this highlights the distinction that is often blurred between *goal/objective* and *purpose/point*, not only in pedagogic tasks, but in formal language learning in general. For example, the objective of a task set for the learner might be to solve a problem, while the purpose might be to focus on/ practice some aspect(s) of the language. Likewise the overall object of learning a foreign language might be to communicate in it, but the learners might see no purpose or point in that. So for pedagogic tasks, the learning ones would seem to have clear objectives and a common purpose, while the more communicative ones may differ between the objective and purpose. In this latter case, presumably the expression of social intention, and its psycholinguistic counterpart, would be a significant operating principle as Wilkins (1976) rightly proposed, and Long and Crookes (1992), for example, consciously rejected.

If we assume more broadly that task can be defined more or less as *a distinguishable piece of work, with a pre-determined, sometimes routinized, objective, requiring time (and effort) to complete*, it would exclude precisely those every-day exchanges that no native-speaker would call a task such as buying a stamp or talking to their girlfriend - and even more so, if we add *including instructions on procedures* to our definition of task. In fact, target tasks requiring communicative ability would be restricted largely to limited transactional social behaviour.

With learning tasks, the more learning oriented and specific the task, the more focused, and possibly itemized, the processing, so we are back to the recurrent issue of whether there should be pre-planned learning or open communication. The task proposals I am acquainted with do not seem to argue any more convincingly one way or the other from anyone else. In fact, very often by including all classroom activity under task, really everything is allowed to 'go'. The need to distinguish between social processes and psychological ones in formal language learning is an issue we will return to.

2. The new order

The rejection of prescriptive linguistically defined content and behaviourist methods due to evidence from natural second language learning gave rise to proposals by some in the establishment to virtually abandon teaching in favour of process communicate-to-learn alternatives (Krashen, 1982). In its purest form this would assume spontaneous communication and no pre-planning. However, even with the less extreme proposals, most of the rank-and-file have remained particularly sceptical about accurate production ability necessarily resulting from reception activities in the pre-planned comprehension approaches or from purely communicative activities/ tasks in the more interactive approaches. This, coupled with the unwillingness of practitioners to abandon tangible objectives, has led to the new order, which maintains the process orientation while establishing objectives through teacher-learner negotiation (Nunan, 1988; Breen and Candlin, 1980) and vague goal/ purpose-based needs analyses (Long and Crookes, 1992; Nunan, 1988) for the pedagogic tasks. These are nothing more than social/

interactive compromise solutions as a substitute for the apparent dearth of effective researched formal language learning frameworks, or even particular operations. Furthermore, these solutions are void of any evidence of validity and conveniently evade any concrete reference to method in the traditional sense of learning procedures. As Lightbown (1985) observed, much research has shown us what not to do rather than what TO do, which might explain the fashion for 'laissez-faire', which, as we all know, has never favoured the disadvantaged.

3. *Empirical validation*

Sometimes, validity for syllabus proposals is sought through reference to the social/ interactive/ discourse characteristics and contextual conditions of natural second language communication or to psycholinguistic data usually on the conspicuous productive outcomes of language learning, such as interlanguage characteristics, acquisition orders or developmental stages. Even in these cases, when the same research is applied to the classroom, surprisingly different proposals may emerge about the planning of the actual process of learning. For example, given the rejection of linguistic selectional criteria on the basis of his learnability/ teachability hypothesis, Pienemann (1985) himself suggests pre-selecting language input roughly tuned along developmental lines within a functional framework, for focus on productive developmental features. Long (1985), using the same data, opposes any such intervention for reasons similar to those given by Krashen (1982), although he included a needs analysis base. Long (1985) rejects a focus on form, but symptomatically Long and Crookes (1992) include it, though not the pre-selection of forms in the plural. Long (1991) has argued for *form-focus* to be a feature for differentiating between classroom approaches, when really the issue is the preparedness of input with or without *item focus*, as discussed below. In fact, if we remove the requirement of immediate accuracy in the production of presented forms, as Lightbown (1985) and, as I read him, Pienemann (1985:65) do, many of the standard psycholinguistic objections to a developmentally-based pre-selection of language items disappear. Some major questions remain in Pienemann's proposal, however. How is the input additional to the developmental features selected or graded; what part of this input is focused on and how does it convert into productive capacity? At a more global level how should we avoid falling into the prescriptive trap of the structural/ behaviourist era (Lightbown, 1985)?

Apparently we seem to be no nearer a valid formal psycho-social language learning framework now than Brumfit (1981) thought we were over a decade ago. I would hazard that even if we were (and, actually, I think we are) the progressives in the establishment would find it hard to stomach (see Schachter, 1990). This is partly because any new evidence on successful psycholinguistic language learning processes will inevitably lead to greater prescriptivism in methodology, including, for example, the recognition of some positive aspects of behaviourism. At least the structurally-itemized behaviourist packages had a coherent, though somewhat limited or even erroneous, basis for formal language learning with a set of principles which could be evaluated. For this reason, I believe that a distinction between target user resources

(syllabus) and learning procedures (method, not A method) both in psycho- and sociolinguistic terms is still a very valid distinction. To subsume syllabus under method (Breen, 1987; Nunan, 1988), especially when method is then unbelievably nothing more than a set of process guidelines for teacher-learner interaction (Breen, 1989), is really a false economy and a substitute for a lack of any coherent formal language learning targets or procedures. What is needed is the identification of critical, not superficial, differentiating learning variables (Long, 1991) contributing to a set of learning options on which to base decision-making procedures if required (Johnson, 1989). Swaffar et al. (1982), in an article with too many methodological defects to cover adequately here, came to what might be the right conclusions on very questionable premises. They conclude that it is not so much the *what* that is important, but the *when* and the *how* of certain activities in learning sequences.

4. Reception & production

Pienemann's (1985) perception of the significance of the process difference between reception/ interpretation and production/ expression, also central to Breen & Candlin (1980), paralleled by the product input/ output distinction, is crucial to course planning. Obviously, the storage of proceduralized (not procedural) knowledge for reception, coded by form to cope with form-to-meaning processing, will be very different from meaning-based knowledge, cued for productive meaning-to-form processing. Inevitably, expression in terms of formal realizations will consist of features/ items/ units which might be predictable developmentally to a certain extent. Receptive knowledge and ability, however, is much more problematic in this respect. Most discussions of syllabus have been in terms of what learners will ultimately be able to *produce*, not in terms of what they will understand - learning for future production, not reception. I would suggest that this dichotomy of mode can explain one of the main differences between form-based (structural) and meaning-based (notional, not functional which includes contextual intention) syllabuses. The former, although misused with audiolingual production-oriented methodology, presumes receptive coding with forms (structures) activating meanings, and the latter productive coding with meanings (notions) activating forms/ realizations.

Wilkins (1976), in distinguishing the presentation of language for analysis or synthesis, could have explained the issue in terms of mode of future processing. For example, reception requires analyzing while production requires synthesizing forms, which in turn will induce more detailed input analysis (Swain, 1985). Presumably in syllabus specifications, we ought to accommodate both modes, with their differing knowledges and procedures, within an interactive framework. This implies a psycholinguistic learning framework, which has so far been wanting in discussions of syllabus - Clahsen (1990) quite rightly observes that reference to stages of language development says little about how the learning actually occurs. The content would need to be sensitive to representation by mode, while the methods employed would need to include learning procedures that reflect use procedures, and accommodate the conversion of intake from reception to intake for production. For example, if production requires selection, accessing (with prior re-coding by meaning), formulating

and articulation of representations then the methods should reflect this. The major problem here may be not so much understanding target procedures as those procedures based on partial/ incomplete intermediate representational systems, or interlanguages.

5. Negotiated learning

Returning to negotiation, Breen and Candlin (1980) and Breen (1987) encourage the inclusion of the learners in decision-making from the start. The reasons given for this include creating motivating goals and procedures, promoting real communication and process focus, independence training and cooperation plus the fact that learners impose their own learning on the external syllabuses anyway (Kumaravadivelu, 1991). Apart from the inevitability of these positive consequences being tenuous, the negotiation and evaluation of perceptions (Breen, 1989) is not unique to this type of approach and certainly not to task bases. In fact, the negotiating position, which is not and need not be a substitute for concrete learning proposals/ options, can lead to a self-fulfilling prophesy, in that what is being done is what is needed/ wanted because it has been negotiated. Furthermore, this seemingly progressive orientation could be a disguise for a reactionary position against external evaluation, on the one hand, since courses would be in constant flux due to continuous negotiation/ evaluation/ adjustment with nothing defined or definite, and against accountability, on the other, since the responsibilities would be supposedly shared anyway - a position conveniently adopted by some so-called liberal teachers in post-Franco Spain, for example. Even if the principles advocated were desirable and of less limited applicability, sooner or later the major course design issues and choices arise in terms of units, content and procedures in language learning, with possible variations between one context and another. In a word, let us not confuse planning procedures with learning ones on the one hand or the following distinctions on the other:

<div align="center">

PROCESSES

social   mental

</div>

learning

FOR

interaction

6. Needs analysis

The more moderate proposals (Nunan, 1988; Nunan, 1989; Long, 1985; Long and Crookes, 1992) resuscitate fairly standard ESP procedures (see Hutchinson & Waters, 1987), and what appear to be macro and micro functions, again fairly standard. The task is used as the unit, rather confusingly, for analysis and planning, accompanied by a focus on form. However, some of the inherent problems of target needs analyses (McDonough, 1984) which were apparent in Long (1985) have miraculously disappeared in Long and Crookes (1992) - learning needs are quietly ignored or assumed under pedagogical tasks. Long and Crookes (1992) include the negotiation of tasks, and Nunan (1988) argues that there should be evaluation/ negotiation of existing

activities (see also Brindley, 1989). Somewhat surprisingly, Nunan admits on various occasions that where teacher-learner expectations diverge, not to mention learner-learner differences, the teacher would resort to bringing learners round to content and procedures (s/he) considered most beneficial. This, at best, sounds more like keeping the customer satisfied than real negotiating, and at worst disguised manipulation or social engineering. We still come back, however, to the real differences in the proposals and the variable options available however they may be negotiated and selected.

7. Fundamental options

Given that 'any process of presentation by the teacher involve(s) judgements about selection' (Brumfit, 1979), we have two poles: one with input which is focused around prepared language and the other with input that is not so derived, even though it might be controlled in terms of content, linguistic adjustments and contextual propping - focus here is distinguished from control (Bruton, unpublished). These two extremes, which do not include the previously discussed negotiation variables as in White's (1988) Type 'A' and 'B' overgeneralized paradigm, really reflect the learn-for-future-communication and the communicate-to-learn standpoints, with an intermediate learn-to-communicate-now position:

a) *Communicate-to-learn*

Communicative interaction [including content teaching, immersion, problem-solving/ communication tasks] resulting in naturally modified linguistic input and spontaneous output (with optional feedback on meaning and diagnostically determined learning activities).

b) *Learn-to-communicate-now*

Communicative tasks [derived from needs based real tasks] with build-up and enabling learning activities (optional feedback on form/ meaning and diagnosis).

c) *Learn-for-future-communication*

Contextualized itemized (form or meaning-based) prepared input with specific focus to aid learning leading to less controlled oral communication, writing or reading activities, via controlled reception or production exercises.

8. Other variables

Apart from these two major distinctions, there are a number of other significant variables. In the more planned cases of (b) and (c), we should distinguish the receptive oriented approaches from the productive ones (see Swaffar et al. 1982), and whether there is: pre-determined item focus in the receptive and/ or productive processing of the language; deductive paradigms and explanations; teacher control or not in the classroom activities; corrective language feedback; emphasis on language learning strategies, for independence, or on content/ ability as an accumulation of knowledge/ skill.

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When translating these options into possible classroom practice, other differentiating factors and limitations come into play. Basically, the language class has the option of teacher-fronted or non-teacher-fronted interaction. In both cases the activities can be more or less controlled and communicative (Murphy,1993). However, there is one big difference which is that in the non-teacher-fronted activities the learners do not interact and receive immediate feedback from target models, usually teachers. That is not to say that the learners cannot use reading and listening material, and that they themselves cannot interact orally. The main limitation is exposure to listening to genuine target speech in real time and receiving native-like reactions and feedback, which is not delayed. Furthermore, we cannot ignore conclusions such as those of Wong-Fillmore (1985) that groups of learners with the same L1 seem to learn more accurately under teacher-fronted than small-group arrangements.

The classroom organization issue just mentioned and the variation in the preparedness of the input of the three positions above together with the question of classroom focus on items in input, processing and correction/ feedback seem crucial to any syllabus proposals. The degree, amount and type of focus will be affected by external classroom contexts, since we have found in Seville that learners of Spanish who have accessible target models outside the class (the prototype SL) want much more item-focused classwork, while those learners of English who do not (the prototype FL) prefer a range of activities from item-focus to communication-focus.

Nunan (1988) gives numerous examples of learners who do not favour communication activities, games and such like and their opinions, which we have replicated in Seville, should not be ignored. Many of these activities, it should be noted are what are being proposed by Long, Crookes and Nunan as tasks. I have not mentioned the differences in classroom conditions because, with Long & Crookes' (1992) unfortunate reference to cancer cures, it seems that teachers having large classes, numerous different groups, a lack of resources, and the learners little native-speaker contact, for example are no longer the order of the day in Manoa, Sydney, Perth, or Lancaster. What is more, the appropriacy of different input and methods varying as learners' abilities reach levels of linguistic coherence and the question of level or age/ maturity in negotiation are also left by the by (though not by Allwright way back in 1979). Finally, regional and national institutional requirements/ necessities never seem to be accorded the crucial status they actually occupy.

9. Conclusions

With respect to proposals for changes in approaches to syllabus design, Nunan (1988) argues that the teacher is now to be more central than ever. That is all very well, but after dismantling many of the bases of existing syllabuses, however they may be interpreted in reality by the learners, most of the self-appointed reformers seem to offer few tangible validated alternatives. At least the fairly standard syllabus/ method frameworks have resulted in extensive learning, as any practising teacher is well aware, and maybe we should build on those to give teachers something that will actually help them improve, rather than confuse what they do. As far as I am concerned, task as a

basis for syllabus remains a panacea for wishy washy confusionism, neither exploring nor resolving in any depth the real socio-political educational issues or the socio-psycholinguistic pedagogical issues of the classroom. The so-called process syllabuses or White's type B are really about social processes supposedly leading to learning, rather than about effective learning processes per se. As for task, it should be limited to independent goal-oriented organizing activities between the level of exercise and project, along controlled/ focus dimensions (Bruton, 1992). In terms of syllabus, however, it is to state the obvious that people do not learn tasks and, in terms of method, a task basis for learning may actually prove more limited than the choice of learning activities we already have.

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