

A non-marginal role for tasks

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Introduction

In the last thirty years, the field of second language acquisition (SLA) has grown in importance, moving from a stage when it was an offshoot of first language research, to a status, over the last fifteen years or so, where it has started to make more ambitious claims about its relevance for second language instruction. An excellent survey of these developments is provided in two articles in *Applied Linguistics*, both by Patsy Lightbown, the first published in 1985, the second in 2000. Each explores the relevance of SLA for pedagogy, and despite differences in the content which reflects our development in understanding, the two articles have in common a certain sense of humility about the *immediate* relevance of what researchers are saying, generally following the dictum ‘apply with caution’!

One might think that Anthony Bruton’s article in this issue ‘From tasking purposes to purposing tasks’ would fit in with this approach of Lightbown’s very well. But it is the purpose of the present article to argue that Bruton misrepresents language learning tasks, and does them a disservice. Even though I do not think that immediate and simple application of SLA findings is justified, I think that tasks are more relevant to teachers, and SLA research more relevant to language learning than Bruton would have us believe. Indeed, I do not think it is helpful to conclude that tasks are ‘being used to lobby particular academic interests’. In fact, as I indicate later, I do think particular interests are being promoted, but by Bruton, and that they are chiefly concerned with the promotion of a profitable status quo.

The teaching learning problem

Clearly, what teachers want is to get their learners to do things that they couldn’t do before! In the case of language teachers, this includes helping learners to deal with target language structure (and vocabulary) and to achieve control over them (as well as a range of appropriateness and use issues). In addition, for most teachers, this puzzle has to be solved with *groups* of learners, groups which may, (and almost certainly will) be composed of learners of different talents, different motivations, and even different stages of development. Effective teaching, then, is concerned with techniques to deal with this problem, and therefore likely to involve selection of material (syllabus decisions) and classroom procedure decisions (methodology). In conventional approaches, as

advocated by Bruton, these techniques are designed to get learners, in their groups, to learn new things, generally organized in terms of language (presentation), in order to gain control over these new things (practice), and then finally to learn how to use them in a less controlled manner (production). Bruton sees oral tasks as largely confined to the second and third of these stages, and limited in such a way that they only promote the development of oral fluency.

This approach makes some assumptions which it is useful to explore. Let us first assume that all learners in a class are at exactly the same level, and have the same talents and motivation, etc. (a wildly unrealistic but temporarily useful assumption). A grammar-based approach would then present a new structure (say), practise it, and give learners the opportunity to use it more freely. The learning theory on which this is based is essentially that of automatization, i.e. we start with something new which we can only control slowly, with effort, and under supportive conditions, then gradually (through the practice and production stages in language learning) withdraw these supports until the structure can stand all alone and be used effectively. This skill-based view of learning undoubtedly applies to many domains. But it is questionable whether it applies to language. Language consists of innumerable systems, often complex and often interlocking. There is also evidence that to learn something new often involves 'unlearning', or at least modifying something which was learnt earlier. In other words, it is not realistic to treat language learning as comparable to (say) learning scales on the piano, or learning to juggle. Language learners are not blank slates, waiting for teachers to devise instructional sequences: they need to internalize and work with rule-governed systems. Drumming material in through practice activities runs the risk that all the compliant and talented learners will do is learn to produce what the teacher wants, under classroom conditions, and that such learning may not truly take root.

Worse still, we have to relax the unrealistic assumptions we made earlier. Classes are made up of a range of individuals with different talents, styles, and motivations. As a result, what may be presented to a group may only be appropriate for a small number of learners within that group. For others it may be too difficult, for yet others too easy. In the second case, it is an ineffective but excusable waste of time. In the first case, where the material is too difficult, the time spent focusing on the language element may also be a waste of time, but in this case it will leave the particular language point untouched, since the learner isn't ready to absorb it, although the teacher and class may assume that the point has been learnt. This is altogether more serious, since as instruction continues, things may get worse because the initial learning couldn't occur. Classroom life may continue, but the learner is in danger of becoming progressively unhooked from the pedagogic plans that are made.

Concerns such as these may prompt a move towards a task-oriented approach, which stems from three main sources. First, a considerable body of evidence from more naturalistic studies suggests that learners in such situations do not follow the sequences that are typically expected in

classrooms, and in language teaching materials. Second, SLA strongly suggests that language development involves the growth of an interlanguage, a rule-based system which reflects the learners' appreciation of the patterns of the target language which need to be mastered. Third, there is a need to build in opportunities for individualization of instruction, so that learners who are at different stages can profit in relation to the point which they have reached. In other words, they will need to obtain feedback according to where they, rather than where the coursebook happens to be. (See Ellis 1994 for a discussion of all these issues.)

The attractions of tasks

Earlier SLA research focused on naturalistic (non-classroom) learning. Soon, however, the focus switched to classroom applications, and for the last fifteen to twenty years increasing amounts of research have been conducted with classroom connections. First of all, and as a complement to communicative language teaching, emphasis was placed on information gap activities, for instance, and other 'staples' of the communicative classroom. This research was interesting—in suggesting that two-way information gap activities are better than one-way tasks, for example—but somewhat piecemeal. Since that early work, SLA researchers have tended to formalize what they were doing, and to speak increasingly not of activities but of tasks, and to try to characterize tasks effectively, so that (a) a greater degree of predictability and dependability would be involved, and (b) there would be better prospects of using tasks systematically. We will next move to consider some of this work, looking at three general approaches.

The first major influence on the use of tasks in language teaching has come from Michael Long. He has made (at least) three major contributions to task work. First, he has argued that tasks should be chosen according to learner need (an aspect of tasks that Bruton discusses). By this, Long means that what teachers require learners to do (pedagogic tasks) should be linked, in ways dependent on needs analyses, to real-world tasks that the learners ultimately aspire to completing. (Interestingly, this view of tasks has not generalized, and, apart from Long, not many others discuss it.) Second, Long initiated debates to explore why not all tasks are equally effective, and to devise research techniques for exploring which tasks are more useful, and when. Third, as a means of distinguishing task quality, Long has argued consistently for tasks which promote what he calls the *negotiation of meaning*, i.e. tasks which, in order to be completed, push learners to engage in checking and clarifying as they go along. He argues that when learners do this, they are signalling to their interlocutors that they are in (slight) difficulty, and so are more likely to receive feedback which 'speaks' to their current problem. In this way, tasks can be a vehicle for individualization, and tasks can enable two learners to collaborate and go beyond their individual competences. On the basis of these contributions, Long argues that tasks can be *the* unit for syllabuses, and that, when chosen and used appropriately, they can be an effective foil for individualized language development (see Long and Robinson 1998 for more extensive discussion of these issues).

A second approach to investigating tasks is more embedded within actual language classrooms than research-based. One example of this is represented by the work of Jane and Dave Willis (Willis 1996). Their emphasis is less on sequencing tasks so much, as on how tasks can best be used. They propose the following stages:

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| ■ Input/ pre-task activities | ■ Planning |
| ■ Task phases | ■ Presentation |
| ■ Actual task | ■ Post-task language focus |

The first stage is preparatory, and tries to ensure that (a) the learners' attention is mobilized, and their interest aroused in some area of meaning, (b) they are provided with some input which may help them. The second stage, which contains three sub-stages, starts with learners doing a task, *and then moves to the learners going over the task they have done*. The usual pretext for so doing is that there will be some sort of presentation which should push learners to be concerned with form, since they will want to present in a manner which, other things being equal, avoids mistakes. The planning phase comes *after* the task, builds upon the meanings which have been made salient in the course of transacting the task itself, and attempts to provide learners with relevant language that will help them to say what they wanted to say, but better. The last phase, language focus, is the time in this methodology when the learners are finally allowed to direct their attention to form. What is interesting in this approach is that the conventional sequence of presentation (language focus), controlled language use (practice(?)), and production (doing the task), have almost been reversed. In other words, a central aspect of the methodology is that the learners themselves, because of the way they do the task, nominate the meanings they want to express, and which, for whatever reason, have been made salient. *The rest of the methodology is concerned with supporting learners to express such meanings with appropriate forms.*

Another teaching-oriented researcher is Virginia Samuda (2001), who has explored how a teacher, running a task in class can work with students to make form-meaning connections more salient for them. So, while they are doing a meaning-focused task, the teacher can skilfully insinuate extending language which the learners can more readily attend to, and incorporate in their own speech. Like the Willis approach, the first stage is to create a 'need to mean'. Then, taking the example of modality, Samuda shows how the teacher can induce the learner to go beyond an initial stage, where modality can only be expressed through words like 'probably' and 'maybe' to a later stage, where with appropriate (and unobtrusive) prompting they can incorporate modal verbs to get across the same ideas.

A third, more cognitive approach to tasks, takes a different perspective which depends on three central propositions. First, it is assumed that we only have limited amounts of attention available during language use. This generally means that in order to attend to one thing, we are likely to have to forego attending to something else. Second, there are tensions between different aspects of language use, with a certain prominence attached to a concern for fluency, on the one hand, and for formal aspects

of language, principally accuracy (error avoidance) and complexity (use of more advanced language), on the other. Note that this slightly extends the contrast between fluency and accuracy, since it distinguishes between learners who are accuracy-oriented (conservative error-avoiders), and those who are 'cutting edge' oriented (less worried about making errors, and more interested in taking chances with newly-learned language). Third, a Focus-on-Form is not regarded as the language users' first priority: it is considered more natural to attend to meaning. *Focusing on Form* has to be contrived, insinuated, or supported in some way—and this becomes the central pedagogic challenge.

Those who take this approach try to discover which types of task, and which conditions for using tasks are more supportive of a Focus-on-Form, making the assumption that by identifying such tasks and conditions teachers are more likely to be able, while still using tasks, to orient learners away from simply focusing on meaning, but also push them to extending and at the same time achieving greater control over the language. My own work with Pauline Foster, for example, has shown that structured tasks and tasks based on familiar information are more likely to produce higher accuracy; that tasks which push learners to achieve more justified conclusions produce more advanced language; that giving learners planning time before they do a task leads to greater complexity; and that giving learners a post-task activity—such as transcribing some of their own performance after a task—leads, with interactive tasks, to greater accuracy. Martin Bygate has shown that getting learners to repeat tasks leads them to become more syntactic in their orientation to the task. Peter Robinson has researched the difference between what he calls 'here and now' vs. 'there and then' tasks, arguing that the second, more difficult task-type leads to more advanced language. (See Skehan 1998 for discussion of this work.)

Earlier I suggested that a task-based approach is generally based on naturalistic language use; that the language-learning problem is how learners, from such use, develop a system of rules; and that individualization is an important aspect of the learning situation. Reviewing the three broad approaches that have been described, we can see now that there are similarities and differences. All provide opportunities for naturalistic language use. Very importantly, all contain measures which are alert to the dangers of a diet of *only* naturalistic use, since they all accept that without something additional, learners are much more likely to focus on meaning to the detriment of form. This feature is what distinguishes contemporary approaches to task-based instruction from earlier attempts, which may have assumed too easily that simply using language would lead to sustained development. Long argues for the importance of feedback, through negotiation of meaning and recasts; Dave and Jane Willis argue that, once created, an initial need to mean (and an associated 'priming' of a need for new language), then needs to be carefully supported and nurtured through the preparation for a report phase, and through *subsequent* consolidating language focus. Samuda suggests that teachers can work with learners to actively promote a focus on form while tasks are being done. The more cognitive approaches, which give less emphasis to individualization, try to

establish how learners' limited attentional capacity can be protected (to allow more chance of a focus on form) and also channelled, so that with certain tasks, and with certain conditions they are more likely to attend to form.

Responding to Bruton After this survey of task work, a response to Anthony Bruton can be organized in three main sections: the nature of learning, the evidence, and the nature of the interests which are at play. Regarding the first, there is a very clear difference between Bruton's approach and the task-based approach with respect to the nature of language and the nature of learning. His approach is consistent with the feasibility of teacher control of the language which is going to be learnt, and with a belief that a teacher's decisions about what is appropriate will prevail as regards what will be presented and focused on. Also implied in this regard is a view of language as *elements* which can be taught in sequence, one-by-one, and completely. Further, the mechanism of learning seems to be one of practice and automatization. After presentation, that is, it is for the teacher to make new language habitual in its accessibility and its use. Finally, it is assumed that learners can be taught in groups, and that teacher skill can cope with presenting whatever aspect of language is involved to the entire group of learners, i.e. any problems because learners are at different levels or have different learning capacities are solvable through teacher behaviour.

In contrast, proponents of a task-based approach find this view of language and learning outmoded, and not believable. They prefer to see language as a rule-governed system, where the apprehension of rules is the key, and any reliance on practice is of doubtful validity. Instead, they would see the need for learners to develop an underlying language system, to add to it, and to complexify it progressively, with such complexification often requiring reorganization, i.e. the 'two steps back, three steps forward' approach. To that end, learning is more likely to take place when individual learners, though engaging with naturalistic language material, notice things that are new, and then try to 'fill the gap' that they have noticed. Learners, in other words, are making hypotheses, and looking for feedback on them. Inevitably, therefore, learners will need to develop individually, since it is their personal language systems that will need development, and personalized feedback that will be the key. Essentially, therefore, this view is learner-driven, whereas Bruton's is teacher-driven.

The second general response concerns the nature of evidence. Perhaps the first thing to say here is that the jury is still out. Essentially, the main problem is to decide what to do when there simply isn't enough evidence available. In that regard, Bruton presents only a limited and selective review. While there are some studies which are not supportive of the use of tasks, these are more than balanced by others which are encouraging. A possible slight problem is that research into tasks tends not to be on a 'grand scale', but instead is more focused, attempting to discover fundamental aspects of tasks which have an impact. (Perhaps this focus is what Bruton mistakes for 'academic interests'?) We do not have complete solutions yet, so the key issue is to decide how we can make

progress, and add to what we know about tasks, rather than dismiss them because we do not yet have the whole story. But it is important here to at least be consistent in the evaluations which are made. While Bruton uses (selective) evidence to assess task research negatively, he does not apply anything like the same standards to other, more language-focused research. And the truth of the matter is that if we were basing our actions in classrooms only on clear research evidence, we wouldn't necessarily have a lot to do, and lessons would risk being very brief. Language-oriented approaches, in other words, cannot themselves point to extensive research to justify the approaches they promote.

This leads naturally to the third general response to Bruton's claims: the sting in the tail which implies self-indulgence by SLA researchers as, while attacking one another, they seek to dominate understanding of language-learning research. As with the evaluation of evidence, this, too, cuts both ways. Let us, in this regard, follow the characterization of a task-based approach and then a language-based approach. In the former case, the emphasis is on the learner, and on devising techniques through which the individual can be responded to and individual learning promoted. This requires a skilful, responsive, knowledgeable teacher who is able to cope with groups of learners and access relevant material as the need arises. There is no clear role in this approach for group-oriented, lockstep, 'one size fits all' materials. In contrast, a language-based approach, since it assumes a powerful role for the teacher, or rather 'the teaching plan', would permit the use of general materials and lockstep approaches. In other words, major coursebook series would be central, and there might even be the prospect of downgrading the role of the teacher, since so many decisions would be taken by the materials themselves. If, therefore, an assessment is made about whose interests are served, it seems to me that the anti-task approach that Bruton takes implicitly serves the interests of publishers, and of conventional approaches to instruction. It does a disservice to the teacher. It does an even greater disservice to the learner.

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