The Methodology of Task-based Teaching

 The design of a task-based lesson involves consideration of the stages or components of a lesson that has a task as its principal component. Various designs have been proposed (e.g. Estaire and Zanon 1994; Lee 2000; Prabhu 1987; Skehan 1996; Willis 1996). However they all have in common three principal phases, which are shown in Figure 1. These phases reflect the chronology of a task-based lesson. Thus, the first phase is 'pre-task' and concerns the various activities that teachers and students can undertake before they start the task, such as whether students are given time to plan the performance of the task. The second phase, the 'during task' phase, centres around the task itself and affords various instructional options, including whether students are required to operate undertime-pressure or not. The final phase is 'post-task' and involves procedures for following-up on the task performance. Only the 'during task' phase is obligatory in task-based teaching. Thus, minimally, a task-based lesson consists of the students just performing a task. Options selected from the 'pre-task' or 'post-task' phases are non-obligatory but, as we will see, can serve a crucial role in ensuring that the task performance is maximally effective for language development.

Phase	Examples of options
A. Pre-task	* Framing the activity (e.g. establishing the outcome of the task) * Planning time * Doing a similar task
B. During task	* Time pressure * Number of participants
C. Post-task	* Learner report * Consciousness-raising * Repeat task

Figure 1: A framework for designing task-based lessons

Access to a clear framework for a task-based lesson is of obvious advantage to both teachers and learners. Richards (1996) shows how many experienced teachers adhere to a maxim of planning ('Plan your teaching and try to follow your plan') while Numrich (1996) reports on how novice teachers feel the 'need to be creative and varied in teaching'. A framework such as the one outlined in Figure 1 caters to both needs. It provides a clear structure for a lesson and it also allows for creativity and variety in the choice of options in each phase.

The pre-task phase

The purpose of the pre-task phase is to prepare students to perform the task in ways that will promote acquisition. Lee (2000) describes the importance of 'framing' the task to be performed and suggests that one way of doing this is to provide an advance organizer of what the students will be required to do and the nature of the outcome they will arrive at. Dornyei (2001) emphasizes the importance of presenting a task in a way that motivates learners. Like Lee, he sees value in explaining the purpose and utility of the task. This may be especially important for learners from traditional 'studial' classrooms; they may need to be convinced of the value of a more 'experiential' approach. Dornyei also suggests that task preparation should involve strategies for whetting students' appetites to perform the task (e.g. by asking them to guess what the task will involve) and for helping them to perform the task. Strategies in this latter category are discussed below.

Skehan (1996) refers to two broad alternatives available to the teacher during the pre-task phase:

> an emphasis on the general cognitive demands of the task, and/or an emphasis on linguistic factors. Attentional capacity is limited, and it is needed to respond to both linguistic and cognitive demands ... then engaging in activities which reduce cognitive load will release attentional capacity for the learner to concentrate more on linguistic factors. (p. 25).

These alternatives can be tackled procedurally in one of four ways; (1) supporting learners in performing a task similar to the task they will perform in the during -task phase of the lesson, (2) as king students to observe a model of how to perform the task, (3) engaging learners in non-task activities designed to prepare them to perform the

task or (4) strategic planning of the main task performance. We will consider each in some detail.

Performing a similar task

The use of a 'pre-task' was a key feature of the Communicational Teaching Project (Prabhu 1987). It was carried out as a whole-class activity with the teacher and involved the learners in completing a task of the same kind as and with similar content to the main task. Thus, it served as a preparation for performing the main task individually. For example, if the main task involved working out a class timetable from the timetables of individual teachers, then the pre-task would be the same but with different information in the teachers' timetables.

Prabhu explains that the pre-task was conducted through interaction of the question-and-answer type. The teacher was expected to lead the class step –by -step to the expected outcome, to break down a step into smaller steps if the learners encountered difficulty and to offer one of more parallels to a step in the reasoning process to ensure that mixed ability learners could understand what was required. The teacher was provided with a lesson plan that included (1) the pre-task and (2) a set of graded questions or instructions together with parallel questions to be used as needed. When implemented in the classroom, the plan results in a 'pedagogic dialogue'. Prabhu emphasises that the pre-task was not a 'demonstration' but 'a task in its own right'. It is clear from this account that the 'pre-task' serves as a mediational tool for the kind of 'instructional conversation' that sociocultural theorists advocate. The teacher, as an expert, uses the pre-task to scaffold learners' performance of the task with the expectancy that this 'other-regulation' facilitates the 'self-regulation' learners will need to perform the main task on their own.

Providing a model

An alternative is to ask the students to observe a model of how the task can be performed without requiring them to undertake a trial performance of the task (see Aston (1982) for an early example of such an approach). Minimally this involves presenting them with a text (oral or written) to demonstrate an 'ideal' performance of the task. Both Skehan (1996) and Willis (1996) suggest than simply 'observing' others perform a task can help reduce the cognitive load on the learner. However, the model can also be accompanied by activities designed to raise learners' consciousness about specific features of the task performance-for example, the strategies that can be employed to overcome communication problems, the conversational gambits for

holding the floor during a discussion or the pragmalinguistic devices for performing key language functions. Such activities might require the learners to identify and analyze these features in the model texts. Alternatively, they might involve pre-training in the use of specific strategies. Nunan (1989) lists a number of learning strategies (e.g. 'Learning to live with uncertainty' and 'Learning to make intelligent guesses') that students can be taught to help them become 'adaptable, creative, inventive and above all independent' (p. 81) and thus more effective performers of a task. However, the effectiveness of such strategy training remains to be convincingly demonstrated.

Non-task preparation activities

There are a variety of non-task preparation activities that teachers can choose from. These can centre on reducing the cognitive or the linguistic demands placed on the learner. Activating learners' content schemata or providing them with background information serves as a means of defining the topic area of a task. Willis (1996) provides a list of activities for achieving this (e.g. brainstorming and mind-maps). When learners know what they are going to talk or write about they have more processing space available for formulating the language needed to express their ideas with the result that the quantity of the output will be enhanced and also fluency and complexity. Recommended activities for addressing the linguistic demands of a task often focus on vocabulary rather than grammar, perhaps because vocabulary is seen as more helpful for the successful performance of a task than grammar. Newton (2001) suggests three ways in which teachers can target unfamiliar vocabulary in the pre-task phase; predicting (i.e. asking learners to brainstorm a list of words related to the task title or topic), cooperative dictionary search (i.e. allocating different learners words to look up in their dictionary), and words and definitions (i.e. learners match a list of words to their definitions). Newton argues that such activities will 'prevent the struggle with new words overtaking other important goals such as fluency or content-learning' when learners perform the task. However, there is always the danger that pre-teaching vocabulary will result in learners treating the task as an opportunity to practise pre-selected words. In the case of task supported teaching this can be seen as desirable but in the case of task-based teaching it can threaten the integrity of the task.

Strategic planning

Finally, learners can be given time to plan how they will perform the task. This involves 'strategic planning' and contrasts with the 'online planning' that can occur during the performance of the task. It can be distinguished from other pre-task options in that it does not involve students in a trial performance of the task or in observing a model. However, it may involve the provision of linguistic forms/strategies for performing the

task but a distinction can still be drawn between the non-task preparation procedures described above and strategic planning, as the former occur without the students having access to the task they will be asked to perform while strategic planning involves the students considering the forms they will need to execute the task workplan they have been given.

There are a number of methodological options available to teachers who opt for strategic planning. The first concerns whether the students are simply given the task workplan and left to decide for themselves what to plan, which typically results in priority being given to content over form, or whether they are given guidance in what to plan. In the case of the latter option, the guidance may focus learners' attention on form or content or, as in Sangarun's (2001) study, form and content together. Skehan (1996) suggests that learners need to be made explicitly aware of where they are focussing their attention-whether on fluency, complexity or accuracy. These planning options are illustrated in Figure 2. Here the context is a task involving a balloon debate (i.e. deciding who should be ejected from a balloon to keep it afloat). The guidance can also be 'detailed' or 'undetailed' (Foster and Skehan 1996). The examples in Figure 2 are of the undetailed kind. Skehan (1998) gives an example of detailed planning for a personal task involving asking someone to go to your house to turn off the oven that you have left on. This involved instructions relating to planning content (e.g. 'think about what problems your listener could have and how you might help her') and language (e.g. 'think what grammar you need to do the task'). These options do not just provide for variety in planning activities; they also enable the teacher to channel the learners' attention onto different aspects of language use. For example, Foster and Skehan (1996) found that when students were given detailed guidance they tended to prioritise content with resulting gains in complexity when they performed the task.

Reflecting on the task

Willis (1996) recommends asking students to present a report on how they did the task and on what they decided or discovered. She considers this 'the natural conclusion of the task cycle' (p. 58). The teacher's role is to act as a chairperson and to encourage the students. The reports can be oral or written. Willis' examples make it clear that the reports should primarily focus on summarising the outcome of the task. However, it would also be possible to ask students to reflect on and evaluate their own performance of the task. For example, they could be invited to comment on which aspect of language use (fluency, complexity or accuracy) they gave primacy to and why, how they dealt with communication problems, both their own and others, and even what language they

learned from the task (i.e. to report what Allwright (1984) has called 'uptake' [1]). Students could also be invited to consider how they might improve their performance of the task. Encouraging students to reflect on their performance in these ways may contribute to the development of the metacognitive strategies of planning, monitoring and evaluating, which are seen as important for language learning (O'Malley and Chamot 1990).

Focussing on forms

Once the task is completed, students can be invited to focus on forms, with no danger that in so doing they will subvert the 'taskness' of the task. It is for this reason that some methodologists recommend reserving attention to form to the post-task phase of the lesson. Willis (1996), for example, sees the primary goal of the 'task component' as that of developing fluency and promoting the use of communication strategies. The post-task stage is needed to counter the danger that students will develop fluency at the expense of accuracy. In part, this is met by asking students to report on their performance of the task, as discussed above, but it can also be achieved by a direct focus on forms. It should benoted, however, that this is the not the position taken in this paper. I have emphasised that a focus on form constitutes a valuable during-task option and that it is quite compatible with a primary focus on message content, which is the hallmark of a task. Furthermore, insome tasks (e.g. consciousness raising tasks) a linguistic feature is made the topic of the task. Attention to form, in one way or another, can occur in any (or indeed all) of the phases of a task-based lesson. In the pre-task and post-task phases the focus will be on forms while in the during- task phase it will be on form, to invoke Long's (1991) distinction.

Two obvious methodological questions arise regarding attention to form in the post-task phase. The first concerns which forms should be attended to. The answer is fairly obvious; teachers should select forms that the students used incorrectly while performing the task or 'useful' or 'natural' forms (Loshcky and Bley Vroman 1993) that they failed to use at all. In other words, teachers should seek to address errors or gaps in the students' L2 knowledge. Consideration also needs to be given to how many such forms a teacher should seek to address. Should the focus be placed on a single form that is treated intensively or a number of forms that are treated extensively? Both approaches are warranted and are reflected in the various options described below.

The second question concerns how the target forms should be dealt with. There is a whole range of options available to the teacher. It should be noted however that in many cases the effectiveness of these options has not been investigated.

1. Review of learner errors

While the students are performing a task in groups, teachers can move from group to group to listen in and note down some of the conspicuous errors the students make together with actual examples. In the post-task phase, the teacher can address these errors with the whole class. A sentence illustrating the error can be written on the board, students can be invited to correct it, the corrected version is written up, and a brief explanation provided. Lynch (2001) offers an interesting way of conducting a post-task analysis, which he calls 'proof-listening'. This involves three cycles based on repeated playing of a recording of the task. First, the students who did the task review and edit their own performance. Second, the recording is replayed and other students are invited to comment, correct or ask questions. Finally, the teacher comments on any points that have been missed.

2. Consciousness-raising tasks

CR-tasks constitute tasks in their own right and, therefore, can be used as the main task in a lesson. But they can also be used as follow-up tasks to direct students to attend explicitly to a specific form that they used incorrectly or failed to use at all in the main task. Willis and Willis (1996) and Ellis (1997b) offer descriptions of the various options that are available for the design and implementation of CR tasks. When used as follow-up tasks, CR tasks can profitably take their data from recordings of the students' performance of the task. For example, students might be presented with a number of their own utterances all illustrating the same error and asked to identify the error, correct the sentences and work out an explanation.

3. Production practice activities

An alternative or addition to CR tasks is to provide more traditional practice of selected forms. Traditional exercise types include repetition, substitution, gapped sentences, jumbled sentences, transformation drills, and dialogues. Willis (1996; pp. 110) offers a number of more novel ideas. The value of such production practice activities has been called into question (see, for example, VanPatten 1996) on the grounds that they have no direct effect on learners' interlanguage systems. However, they may help learners to automatize forms that they have begun to use on their own accord but have not yet gained full control over.

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