Analysis of the Task-Based Syllabus: Strengths, Weaknesses, and the Case for its Implementation

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Select one type of syllabus from the list below, and comment on its strengths and weaknesses.

Task-based syllabus

Show how the syllabus has been influenced by particular theories (and models) of both language and learning. Describe the teaching situation (or situations) which you believe is best suited to this type of syllabus. Outline the arguments for choosing this type of syllabus.

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1. Introduction.

This paper will examine the task-based syllabus, assessing its positive and negative factors, and investigating contexts for which it is best suited. The paper begins by briefly defining the task-based syllabus and outlining why this syllabus was chosen. Section 2 examines task-based approaches more closely, focusing on the underlying theories of language and language learning that form its basis. Section 3 outlines the strengths and weaknesses of a task-based syllabus, before discussing the particular teaching contexts to which it is best suited and presenting the arguments for choosing a task-based syllabus in section 4. Finally, the essay concludes by emphasising the importance of understanding the particular teaching context when selecting a syllabus to best facilitate learning.

1.1 Outline of the Task-Based Syllabus

A task-based syllabus is, briefly, a syllabus which uses tasks as the unit of syllabus analysis (Long & Crookes 1992:41). However, it is necessary to further define what is meant by tasks and task-based language teaching. Tasks can be defined in a variety of ways, as, for example:

> Activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome. (Willis 1996a:23)

Or as:

> A piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form. (Nunan 1989:10)

Van den Branden (2006:7-8) provides a more comprehensive review of definitions of tasks, but for the purposes of this assignment, Willis's definition and framework are followed (see Fig. 1). Task-based approaches are often contrasted with traditional methods such as a Presentation, Practice, Production (PPP) models which introduce a small number of set language forms before allowing learners to practice in controlled conditions then encouraging them to use the forms spontaneously (Willis & Willis 2007: 4). In contrast, task-based learning aims to provide the conditions for learners' language abilities to develop naturally (Foster 1999:69).
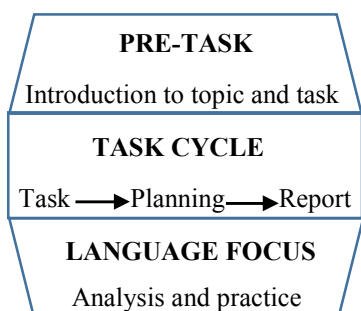
Fig. 1 task-based learning framework (Willis 1996b:53)

1.2 Why the Task-Based Syllabus was Chosen

The task-based syllabus offers a refreshing alternative to traditional linguistic syllabuses. Many teachers experience frustration with the PPP model (Willis 1996b:52), which has failed to achieve acceptable levels of L2 competence (Skehan 1996a:18) as 'learners do not simply acquire the language to which they are exposed, however carefully that exposure may be orchestrated by the teacher'. In other words, learners are unlikely to learn the specific language forms presented to them during the course of a lesson. This was certainly something I have experienced in my own language teaching, therefore I believe that task-based learning gives teachers the opportunity to help learners develop their language abilities naturally through communication and interaction with others.

2. <u>Theories of Language and Learning</u>

This Section will outline the underlying theories of language and language learning that have influenced task-based learning to gain greater insight into its underlying beliefs.

2.1 Theories of Language

While task-based language teaching (TBLT) is more strongly influenced by theories of learning than theories of language (Shehadeh 2005:15), Richards and Rodgers (2001:226-8) list four assumptions about the nature of language within TBLT:

- Language is primarily a means of making meaning
- Multiple models of language inform TBI
- Lexical units are central in language use and language learning
- "Conversation" is the central focus of language and the keystone of language acquisition

The centrality of meaning is common across much of the TBLT literature (Nunan 1989:12; Nunan 2004:6; Willis & Willis 2007:6). While previous approaches viewed language as a list of forms to be mastered (Willis & Willis 2001:173), TBLT highlights the importance of meaning and communicative use in language learning. TBLT therefore, lies on the belief that language is more than a system of rules, it is a 'dynamic resource for the creation of meaning' (Nunan 1989:12). Previous methods are further criticised for presenting unnatural, simplistic, sentence-level forms of the target language (Long & Crookes 1992:30) and teaching explicit knowledge of grammatical rules rather than fostering the ability to use language (Prabhu 1987:13). In addition, the lexical nature of language is also gaining increasing recognition within TBLT (Willis & Willis 2007:192-6; Skehan 1996a:21). Language in a task-based syllabus can therefore be seen as a means for communication (Nunan 2004:7), enabling speakers to fulfil various functions while focussing on meaning.

2.2 Theories of Language Learning

Task-based syllabuses, which fall under White's classification of 'Type B' syllabuses, represent a move away from traditional 'Type A' syllabuses. As shown in table 1 (below), type A syllabuses can generally be regarded as specifying **what** is to be learnt, whereas type B syllabuses primarily concern **how** it is learnt (White 1988:44-5):

Table 1: Language Syllabuses: Types A and B

Type A What is to be learnt?	*Type B* How is it to be learnt?
Interventionalist	
External to the learner	Internal to the learner
Other directed	Inner directed or self fulfilling
Determined by authority	Learner and teacher as joint decision makers
Content=what the subject is to the expert	Content=what the subject is to the learner
Content=a gift to the learner from the teacher or knower	Content=what the learner brings or wants
Objectives defined in advance	Objectives described afterwards
Subject emphasis	Process Emphasis
Assessment by achievement or mastery	Assessment in relationship to learners' criteria for success
Doing things to the learner	Doing things for or with the learner

Syllabuses which specify lists of structures or linguistic items to be taught separately can also be classified as *synthetic* language teaching strategies, in contrast with *analytic* syllabuses for which content is not an organising factor and language is not pre-selected (Wilkins 1976:2). Proponents of task-based syllabuses argue that synthetic, type A syllabuses are ineffectual as they 'assume a model of language acquisition unsupported by research findings on language learning' (Long & Crookes 1992:30). Research into SLA has shown that learners do not learn isolated linguistic items in an additive manner in an order specified by the teacher, thus casting doubt on the validity of synthetic syllabuses (Foster 1999:69; Shehadeh 2005:16; Long & Crookes 1992:31).

Task-based approaches recognise that learning is controlled by internal processes (Skehan 1996a:18), and that learners do not move from being unable to use a syntactic form to mastery in one step, but pass through developmental stages of nontargetlike use (Long & Crookes 1992:31). Therefore, drawing on a wide variety of research from SLA such as work by Krashen (1985), task-based approaches aim not to pre-select and teach language in a pre-specified order, but to best create the conditions necessary for acquisition to take place (Prabhu 1987:1; Richards & Rodgers 2001:223). Tasks provide exposure to rich input, as well as opportunities for creative output and negotiation of meaning, believed to be key factors in second language acquisition (ibid.:228).

Previous approaches have been further criticised for explicitly teaching grammatical rules, which is argued to lead to knowledge about language, but not necessarily the ability to use it (Prabhu 1987:13). Furthermore, Prabhu argues that internal grammatical systems are too complex to be incorporated into a language syllabus (ibid.:17). In addition, grammatical systems are believed to operate unconsciously, thus Prabhu argues that knowledge which operates at an unconscious level is best developed subconsciously, and that by consciously attending to meaning learners can develop their grammatical competence (ibid.:15-6). However, while focus on grammar was initially criticised by proponents of TBLT, it is now widely recognised that some focus of form is necessary to aid acquisition (Long & Crookes 1992:43).

Finally, it is argued that learners learn by actively using language (Skehan 1996a:20; Nunan 2004:12). Learners are given the opportunity to experiment and form their own ideas about language and produce new meanings as they practise (Hedge 2000:359-60; Beglar & Hunt 2002:97). Rather than specifying forms for learners to use, task-based approaches allow

learners to use their own language to accomplish non-linguistic task goals. Task-based learning offers learners opportunities to use language as a communicative tool in social interaction, as well as creating the context for form-focused activity after the task cycle has been completed.

3. <u>Strengths and Weaknesses of a Task-Based Syllabus</u>

This section outlines the positive and negative aspects of a task-based syllabus, to gain a better understanding of where its strengths and weaknesses lie.

3.1 Strengths of a task-based syllabus

3.1.1 SLA Theory Base

One of the most salient claims made by proponents of task-based syllabuses is that they have a sound base in theories of language learning, as outlined in section 2.2. Crookes and Long (1993:37), for example, argue that task-based syllabuses are based on second language learning research, second language classroom research, and principles of course design. As SLA research has shown, language is not learned sequentially in an additive manner, it is therefore argued that synthetic syllabuses are inadequate as they rely on specifying and sequentially teaching linguistic items. This gives support to analytic syllabuses such as the task-based syllabus which aim to activate the internal processes which lead to acquisition (Nunan 2004:11; Beglar & Hunt 2002:97).

3.1.2 Focus on Form and Noticing

A danger of task-based interaction is that if used alone it may sufficiently foster fluency, but not lead to language growth (Skehan 1996a:22). Both Willis (1996b) and Skehan (1996b) argue that focus on form is therefore a necessary component of task-based instruction. Focus on form allows not only the introduction of potentially useful language for learners to experiment with, but also increases the saliency of features of the target language to facilitate noticing, thus speeds up the process of input becoming intake (Long & Crookes 1992:42). Learner attention can be further directed to form through repeat performances of tasks, which enables closer focus on language form (Hawkes:2012). This supports an important principle of TBLT, which aims to recycle language use in order to maximise learning opportunities (Nunan 2004:36).

3.1.3 A Learner-Centred Approach

A further benefit of TBLT is that it advocates a learner-centred approach to language learning. While TBLT may not be as strongly learner-centred as a process syllabus, in that the teacher is responsible for selecting tasks to be used, learners are free to use whatever language resources they have available and are not constrained to fixed structures. During the pre-task and task stages learner error is also not explicitly corrected allowing learners to focus on meaning rather than concentrate on trying to conform to linguistic norms. A task-based syllabus therefore offers learners a sense of 'freedom and responsibility' (Van den Branden 2006:10), which seems likely to also increase student motivation. Further to this, Nunan argues, learners learn best through active use of language, therefore the majority of class time should be devoted to using the language (Nunan 2004:36).

3.1.4 Real-World Language Use

Through exposure to authentic materials and rich samples of listening and reading texts TBLT aims to provide learners with 'optimal learning opportunities' (Nunan 2004:49; Willis 1996a:147). Relating language to the real world is in fact a key factor of TBLT (Van den Branden 2006:6). Nunan (2004:19-22) highlights the difference between target tasks, the real-world uses learners may be expected to engage in, and pedagogical tasks, activities for practice of language within the classroom which do not relate to a specific real-world use situation. The recognition of real-world language use is further exemplified in the support of needs analysis within TBLT. Long and Crookes (1992:44; 1993:40) propose that a task-based syllabus should begin by identifying relevant target tasks before classifying these tasks into task types and finally deriving pedagogic tasks for classroom use.

3.1.5 Tasks Build Fluency and Create Motivation

Through meaning-focused activity, interaction and a removal of teacher dominance, tasks can facilitate increased fluency and natural acquisition (Willis 1996a:18). This can be seen as a major strength of task-based approaches. Through negotiation of meaning learners become more adept at conveying meaning, while frequent practice and experimentation with language forms will lead to the ability to deploy existing knowledge more efficiently in conversation. Willis (1996a:14) further argues that success and satisfaction in using language to achieve task goals will lead to increased motivation, a strong factor in language learning success.

3.1.6 Flexibility of the Task-Based Syllabus

Finally, as task-based approaches to syllabus design do not specify the type of language to be taught they offer both versatility and flexibility. Task-based approaches can be adapted to a wide variety of teaching contexts, such as English for specific purposes, teaching young learners, beginners, as well as helping experienced learners improve fluency and accuracy. Contexts for use of a task-based syllabus are discussed in section 4.1

3.2 Weaknesses of a task-based syllabus

This section outlines the weaknesses inherent in task-based syllabuses, many of which are highlighted by proponents of TBLT.

3.2.1 Problems with the Theoretical Base

Strong criticism of task-based instruction comes from Swan (2005:379-381), who casts doubt on the theories that underlie TBLT. Firstly, in criticising dependence on the on-line hypothesis that learning only takes place during communication, Swan gives the example of adding the particle か (ka) to form questions in Japanese, claiming that with this knowledge one should be able to form questions without acquiring it naturalistically. However, explicit knowledge does not necessarily translate to the ability to use language. He further criticises the noticing hypothesis for being controversial and originating from informal analysis, and teachability hypothesis for lacking empirical evidence. Task-based interaction is further criticised by Seedhouse (1999), claiming that it only produces a restricted kind of communication. It is unclear however, if he includes focus on form in TBLT as part of his analysis.

3.2.2 Focus on Form and a Concern with Syntax

Opponents to task-based syllabuses also criticise claims made regarding the benefits of focus on form. Sheen (2003) proposes that focus on form is a myth perpetuated by proponents of TBLT to support new teaching methods. Swan makes further claim that focus on form**s** is necessary, as skill-building and practice of discrete items leads to automatized knowledge, stating 'one would not wish to travel on a plane whose pilot had been left to acquire the skill of landing naturalistically' (2005:383). This analogy would thus suggest it reasonable to refuse to converse with a non-native speaker on the grounds that they had not yet practised, for example, English past tense. Finally, Swan criticises TBLT for being excessively concerned with acquisition of syntax. However, as task-based approaches develop we are beginning to

see more experimentation, for example, development of vocabulary (Hobbs:2005) and teacher talk (Moser, Harris & Carle:2011).

3.2.3 Fluency at the Expense of New Language

While naturalistic, task-based approaches may excel at developing increasing fluency, they do this, Swan argues, at the expense of teaching new language (2005:378). While this may lead to more efficient use of pre-existing knowledge, it does not sufficiently stretch learners' interlanguage or encourage processing new forms of language. However, this criticism is also recognised by proponents of task-based learning. Skehan (1996a) recognises that native-speakers operate a dual-mode system, allowing them to switch between the need to be precise and a need to communicate quickly through lexicalised forms. Skehan proposes three goals for task-based approaches: accuracy, complexity and fluency. Through careful structuring and the inclusion of pre- and post-task stages he argues teachers can improve not only fluency but also encourage accuracy and experimentation with new language. Likewise, Willis (1996b) includes language focus and practice in the post-task stage to facilitate acquisition of new language.

3.2.4 Difficulties for Teachers

Many proponents of TBLT recognise the increased demands it places on teachers. Skehan (1996a:30) recognises that teachers will need to 'command a significantly wider range of skills than in more structural approaches', while Willis (1996b) states that teachers may feel uncomfortable stepping away and allowing learners more control of their learning. Furthermore, Shehadeh (2005:27-28) argues that one reason traditional approaches remain popular is that teachers can predict language that will occur in lessons. This is perhaps especially valid for non-native-speaker teachers who may not possess the confidence or linguistic knowledge to cope with unexpected language.

3.2.5 Difficulties for Learners

Task-based learning relies on learners utilising existing knowledge to complete tasks. It seems likely therefore that task-based learning would pose a difficulty for absolute beginners whose language resources are severely limited. Brown (2007:243), for example draws attention to the fact that:

In order to complete a task, a learner needs to have sufficient organisational competence, illocutionary competence to convey intended meaning, strategic competence to compensate for unforeseen difficulties, and then all the tools of discourse, pragmatics, and even nonverbal communicative ability

This is particularly the case for learners in the early stages of general education, who may be better served by a product syllabus (Hedge 2000:361). Further to these difficulties, a task-based approach may not be in line with learner expectations of L2 instruction, which can make transition to TBLT difficult (Willis 1996a:137). However, Willis and Willis (2007:217) suggest that by explaining the benefits of a task-based approach and the principles behind it this challenge can be overcome as demonstrated by Loumpourdi's (2005) successful implementation of a transition from PPP to TBL in a grammar module.

3.2.6 Sequencing, Difficulty and Assessment

A final problem for the task-based syllabus lies with the design and implementation, or 'how to put together a series of tasks to form a coherent programme' (Hedge 2000:360). Numerous proposals have been suggested for the selection and grading of tasks into a course of study. For example, Nunan, (2004:113-25) identifies three factors that affect task difficulty:

- Factors of input
- Learner factors
- Procedural factors

Careful consideration of these factors can help teachers assess task difficulty and produce an appropriate sequence of tasks. It is also worth noting that the problem of sequencing is not exclusive to TBLT and presents difficulty for all kinds of language instruction (Long & Crookes 1992:42). Finally, task-based syllabuses are often claimed to be incompatible with traditional testing methods. While it is true that synthetic syllabuses lend themselves easily to testing, Nunan suggests that performance can be measured via criterion-referenced testing (2004:146-147).

Although task-based syllabuses may contain difficulties yet to be overcome, they provide an attractive alternative to synthetic syllabuses that have been labelled in some contexts ineffectual. The next section examines more closely possible contexts which are best served by a task-based syllabus, and outlines arguments for choosing a task-based approach.

4. <u>Practical Applications of a Task-Based Syllabus</u>

Following the above discussion, the most appropriate contexts for use of a task-based syllabus and the arguments for its adoption in language teaching are now outlined.

4.1 Contexts for Use

One context likely to benefit from a task-based syllabus is English for specific purposes (ESP). Designing pedagogic tasks based on needs analyses for use in the classroom, along with the inclusion of authentic materials seem particularly suited to ESP. Learners could, for example, work on drafting a reply to a business letter, or practice language for making a presentation at meetings. Seedhouse (1999:155), while critical of task-based syllabus design highlights the benefits for ESP, while Stark (2005) and Evans (2013) describe the positive results of using TBLT in business English classes.

TBLT can also be beneficial for learners lacking fluency. Task-based approaches encourage more efficient deployment of existing language resources and are often seen to greatly benefit fluency. Task cycles can also be adapted if necessary to further encourage fluency, for example, cutting the report stage in favour of more speaking time during tasks. Willis suggests that this is particularly beneficial to learners with a 'grammar-oriented background' (1996b:59). From my own language teaching experience in Japan, learners often have strong reading skills and knowledge of grammar, but little ability to use language. Furthermore, in her study on silence in Japanese classrooms, Harumi (2010:267-8) suggests the following elements, all three of which are encompassed in TBLT, can encourage active classroom communication:

- Activities that build confidence and facilitate autonomy
- Reflective and interpretative teaching
- Encouragement of mutual participation

This would seem to suggest that task-based approaches are particularly beneficial in Japanese contexts, and there are in fact numerous examples of successful implementation of TBLT in Japan, for example Coulson (2005), Hobbs (2005), and Kiernan (2005).

Finally, although proponents of TBLT argue it is equally beneficial for young learners and beginners, I believe this may not always be the case. The need for existing language in order to complete tasks indicates that beginners could perhaps benefit from a synthetic syllabus initially to form a base of language from which to build, before moving on to more analytic, task-based approaches. Some success has been reported in teaching absolute beginners, for

example Duran & Ramaut (2006), however, their research was carried out in an ESL rather than EFL context. Further to this, TBLT may be difficult with learners at or below primary school age as it aims to give learners more control over their own learning, which may not be appropriate at very young ages. Careless (2002), for example identified problems of noise and indiscipline, over-use of mother tongue and student involvement when implementing TBLT in primary schools in Hong Kong, although he does continue to suggest potential remedies for these difficulties. It therefore seems reasonable to suggest that task-based syllabuses should be used with caution with young learners and absolute beginners.

4.2 Arguments for Choosing a Task-Based Syllabus

Supporters of task-based syllabuses make convincing arguments in favour of TBLT, and while the pedagogical benefits of using tasks in class seem undoubtable, is this enough to justify using tasks as the unit for syllabus design? Opponents such as Swan (2005:376) and Seedhouse (1999:155) argue that while tasks are beneficial, it is unsound to use them as the basis for syllabus design. However, I believe that the task-based syllabus offer learners a greater chance of success in L2 learning. Firstly, SLA research has demonstrated that learning is not a linear process of gradually accumulating new forms. Synthetic syllabuses still operate on the assumption that learners will convert the linguistic input pre-specified and provided by the teacher into intake. Perhaps the greatest strength of the task-based syllabus is that it does not rely on this principle but instead aims to best foster the optimal conditions for L2 acquisition to take place.

Task-based syllabuses offer a principled approach to language teaching and provide a linguistically rich environment of communicative interaction to foster language learning. Reflecting on my own language learning experience with a grammatical syllabus, I often felt the content had little relation to the real world, and felt little motivation to learn the pre-specified grammatical forms it offered. However, through communicating in a L2 with peers and friends, outside the classroom I felt I made great improvements to my L2 ability. From my own language learning experience it would seem that 'learning by doing' is in fact greatly beneficial. Furthermore, by basing pedagogical tasks on real-life target tasks learning can be made interesting and relevant, therefore more beneficial and intrinsically motivating for learners.

Finally, an approach to syllabus design that does not specify forms beforehand offers the teacher more flexibility and the opportunity to put their expert knowledge to good use. Forms

that capture learners' attention can be revisited during the language focus stage of the lesson, allowing teachers to not only teach these forms but also exemplify common usage and alternative meanings. Furthermore, task-based frameworks such as that suggested by Willis (1999b) in section 1.1 are exactly that, just frameworks. Good teachers will recognise that changes and adjustments can be made to better accommodate their particular groups of learners, for example Moser, (2005) who adapts Willis's framework by using language journals throughout the lesson to encourage focus on language form.

While there may be difficulties and problems with task-based syllabuses, I believe they offer most learners the best chance to achieve L2 communicative competence. While opponents may be quick to highlight the potential shortcomings of TBLT, it is worth noting that no syllabus is unproblematic. I feel that the arguments set out in this section, as well as throughout the whole paper offer a convincing rationale for adoption of task-based approaches to syllabus design.

5. <u>Conclusion</u>

This paper has investigated the underlying principles behind TBLT, looking at how it is influenced by theories of language and language learning. The strengths and weaknesses of task-based approaches to syllabus design were then assessed. Finally it examined possible applications and arguments for adopting a task-based syllabus. Task-based approaches offer numerous benefits in a wide variety of teaching contexts. It is vital that teachers have thorough knowledge of their own specific teaching context, as well as an understanding of the beliefs and assumptions about the nature of language and language learning inherent in a particular syllabus when choosing which type of syllabus to adopt. Only by making principled decisions based on these factors, using needs analysis and carefully considering the demands of the institution and social expectations can we best facilitate language learning.

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