

## **English Language and Applied Linguistics**

Postgraduate Distance Learning programmes

### **ESSAY COVER & DECLARATION SHEET**

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#### **DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP**

I declare:

- a) that this submission is my own work;
- β) that this is written in my own words; and
- χ) that all quotations from published or unpublished work are acknowledged with quotation marks and references to the work in question; and

Date: March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2014

**Student ID #1306114**

**Module 3: Syllabus and Materials**

**SM/13/01**

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

Lexical syllabus

Notional/functional syllabus

Grammatical syllabus

Task-based syllabus

Integrated 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.

3812 words

Submitted March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2014

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## **1.0 Introduction**

The lexical syllabus, notional/functional syllabus, grammatical syllabus, task-based syllabus, situational syllabus and the integrated syllabus are among the syllabuses which have been available to ESL teachers past and present (Krahnke, 1987:10). Due to its popularity and its proponent's assertions that it can be an alternative to the widespread and inefficient linguistically based syllabuses widely used in the past (Ellis, 2003; Loumpourdi, 2005; Skehan, 1996; Willis, 1996), the following essay will examine the task-based syllabus.

Following a literature review, this paper will explore the strengths and weaknesses of following a task-based syllabus. The arguments for and against using a task-based approach will be presented and discussed. This work will attempt to ascertain which classroom dynamic this syllabus is best suited for, and whether or not its implementation is feasible and worthwhile.

## **2.0 Literature review**

In order to fully explain the best way to implement a task based syllabus, a review of the literature is necessary. The next section will explain what a syllabus and task are and their relationship with one another in terms of a task based syllabus.

### **2.1 Syllabus**

To accurately describe a task-based approach, we must have a clear idea of what a syllabus is and its purpose in the language classroom. According to Richards (2001), "a syllabus is a specification of the content of a course of instruction and lists what will be taught and tested" (2). The difference between syllabus and curriculum should be noted. White (1998) shows that "a syllabus is little more than a specification of content" (88), while a curriculum is defined as everything taught for an entire school, district, country, etc. (87). A syllabus is essential in the language classroom for the following reasons:

1. Language is complex and must be made manageable. The syllabus divides assignments, texts and learning.
2. It provides moral support for the learner and teacher.
3. Serves a cosmetic role, making the course appear professional and thought out.
4. Gives learners and teachers a guide of where they are going and how they might get there.

5. Teachers and learners are told what and why they are learning.
6. Defines the text and materials and the criteria for their use.
7. Provides uniformity and standardization across a school or system.
8. Provides a visible basis for what is to be tested (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987: 84).

With this in mind, the next section will explore different types of syllabus in detail.

## 2.2 Type A & B

Task based syllabuses can be put into two broad categories. White R.V. (1998) says Type A syllabuses are considered interventionist, and only focus on what is to be learned (the L2). This syllabus is teacher centered and the language to be learned is rigidly segmented, and presented to students in a formulaic, predetermined order. Achievements or mastery of linguistic items is the basis for assessment.

Type B syllabuses are the opposite. They are non-interventionist (i.e. the teacher doesn't get involved), focusing on how the language is to be learned. Teachers are more of a guide, allowing students to acquire the L2 naturally. Success is determined by the learners (44-45). Finch (2000) clearly shows the differences between the two types, below:

### APPENDIX A-27: LANGUAGE SYLLABUS DESIGN: TWO TYPES (WHITE 1988:44).

<b>Type A: What is to be learnt?</b>	<b>Type B: How is it to be learnt?</b>
Interventionist	Non-interventionist
External to the learner	Internal to the learner
Other directed	Inner directed or self fulfilling
Determined by authority	Negotiated between learners and teachers
Teacher as decision-maker	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 and wants
Objectives defined in advance	Objectives described afterwards
Assessment by achievement or by mastery	Assessment in relationship to learners' criteria of success
Doing things to the learner	Doing things for or with the learner.

Seen here, syllabuses can be quite different based on their focus. The next section will examine this division further.

### **2.3 Synthetic & Analytic**

Syllabuses can further be divided into two types: synthetic and analytic. Synthetic syllabuses expose learners to a deliberate amount of the target language, breaking down different parts to be learned one at a time (Long & Crookes, 1992:28; Wilkins, 1976:2). Long & Crookes (1992) claim synthetic syllabuses have unproved assumptions (30). Furthermore, they create artificial and impoverished classroom language and prohibit the progression students need (Long, 2000; Robinson, 2009:302). The lexical, structural, notional, and functional syllabuses are all examples of synthetic, Type A, syllabuses. (Long & Crookes, 1992:28-29).

In contrast, analytic syllabuses present linguistic elements in large parts, and there is no linguistic interference or control over the students' acquisition process. (Long & Crookes, 1992:29). Furthermore, learners are exposed to a variety of language that help express meaning (Salimi et al, 2012:830); grammar and lexis are of secondary importance (Nunan, 1988:38-39); the learners are to begin with function, not grammar; and the syllabus is organized by what purpose the TL is to be acquired (Nunan 1987:28). A task based syllabus is an example of an analytic, Type B, syllabus (Long & Crookes, 1992:29-30).

### **2.4 Implementation**

Before a syllabus can be implemented, the "first step in syllabus design" (Richards, 2001:146) should be to create a course rationale; "A brief description of the reasons for the course and the nature of it" (145). This answers the questions *who* the course is for and *what* is to be learned.

### **2.5 Needs Analysis**

A needs analysis is also a necessary beginning step in the development of a task based syllabus. A needs analysis is "a family of procedures for gathering information about learners and about communication tasks" (Nunan, 1988:76). The importance of a needs analysis is reflected in the desire to separate a task based syllabus from other types because finding sources of task complexity is a

requirement for deciding on the grading and sequencing of tasks (Rahimpour, 2010:1662). Van den Branden (2006) elaborates by noting the importance of a needs analysis with regard to real-world target tasks as a necessity for designing a TBLT syllabus (6). As shown, a needs analysis is critical to the implementation of a successful task based syllabus.

Based on the course rationale and needs analysis, the entry and exit level of students can be determined, course content can be chosen, the scope and sequence can be organized, and the appropriate syllabus framework can be applied (Richards, 2001:145-152). Within this course framework lies the task-based syllabus, which we will now explore further after a specification of task.

## **2.6 Defining Task**

Task-based language teaching uses 'tasks' as the primary source of input for learners. However, the definition of task is still debated (Ellis, 2003, 2009; Long, 1985:89; Nunan, 2004:4; Skehan 1996:38; Willis, 1996:53) “up to a point where anything related to educational activity can be called a task” (Van Den Branden, 2006:3). Ellis (2009) provides one broad definition which can be used to base a syllabus around tasks. First, there is a focus on meaning (i.e. students are concerned with semantics and pragmatics). Second, there is a ‘gap’ which students fill with their own language. Third, students should rely on their own abilities and resources. Finally, the language is used as a means to an end, which is clearly defined (223).

Skehan (1996) defines task with the following criteria: meaning is primary; other learner’s meanings are not repeated; there is a connection to the real world; task completion has some priority; and the assessment of task performance is in terms of outcome (38). This explanation has been “well accepted” (Carless, 2004:641) and will be what this paper refers to when referencing tasks.

## **2.7 Task Based Language Teaching**

With a clearer idea of task in mind, teachers implementing a task based syllabus must expose it to learners in a specific way. Task based language teaching (TBLT) (Prabhu, 1987; Skehan, 1996; Willis, 1996) should consist of three phases. According to Ellis (2003) they include: pre-task (planning), during task (implementation) post-task (reflection). Numerous approaches exist (Ellis, 2003; Long,

1985; Skehan, 1998) but all share the need for natural language use, a focus on form, and of course, the use of tasks. The tasks may either be focused (requiring a grammatical structure) or unfocused (all linguistic sources are available) (Ellis, 2009:225). With the idea of task based language teaching now clear, the following section will explain the task based syllabus.

## **2.8 Task Based Syllabus**

Beginning in the 1980s, three types of syllabus emerged: the procedural syllabus, the process syllabus, and the task syllabus. These syllabuses are all similar in that they reject linguistic elements such as words, structures, notions and functions as the means of analysis and instead focus on some form of task (Long & Crookes, 1992:27). Specifically, a task based syllabus “is organized around tasks that students will complete in the target language. Designed to facilitate second language learning and one in which tasks or activities are the basic units of syllabus design. Learners are thought to receive comprehensible input and modified output” (Richards, 2001:161). Furthermore, Krashen (1987) points out that a task based syllabus is complex, purposeful and useful. Students should want or need the language they are using (10). Richards (2001) explains that pedagogical or real-world type tasks are specifically needed to create such a syllabus that is challenging and time effective. Real-world tasks present situations found in the students’ needs analysis that require practice or rehearsal. Pedagogical tasks encourage learning processes and strategies based on second language acquisition theories.

Examples of pedagogical tasks include jigsaw (piecing information together), information-gap (students negotiate to find the other students' information), problem-solving (finding a resolution), decision-making (a number of possible outcomes) and opinion-exchange (ideological debate or exchange) (162). In the classroom, students could practice using the phone, applying for a job, asking for directions, creating diagrams, drawings, etc. similar to Prabhu’s (1987:138) Bangalore project. To summarize, “a task-based syllabus is concerned with purposeful activities which learners might be expected to engage in real-life situations” (Flowerdew, 2005:136). The use of these purposeful activities and their strengths and weaknesses will now be further explored.



### **3.0 Strengths & Weaknesses**

In the following section, the merits and shortcomings of a task based syllabus will be presented and examined.

#### **3.1 Strengths**

A classroom environment based on a task based syllabus is beneficial for the teacher and student in many ways. One compelling argument for implementing tasks in the classroom is that they can be fun and student-centered, and can incorporate well with games (Nunan, 2005:2). Second Language Acquisition Theory (SLA) shows that student anxiety has a direct negative correlation to L2 proficiency (Saville-Troike, 2006:90). Therefore, a task based syllabus where students are encouraged to have fun could mitigate this issue.

TBLT is based on analytic, Type B Syllabuses which are guided by SLA research. This research shows that ‘formal’ instruction doesn’t affect developmental sequences, positively affects some learning strategies, improves the rate of learning, and most likely improves SL acquisition (Long & Crookes, 1992:42). Finch (2006) concurs, showing that task based instruction is very effective in situations where personal, affective and social development are a focus (57) Task based syllabuses also claim to create more favorable conditions for SLA development than those that focus on form and grammar (Robinson, 1995).

#### **3.2 Research**

An examination of the research into classrooms which have implemented a task based syllabus has yielded interesting results. Nunan (2005) claims that well-chosen, relevant tasks have the potential to lessen the need for the reliance on test driven syllabuses which are extremely common in Asia (2). Mahmoudi & Amirkhiz (2011) found in their comparison of structure vs. task based syllabuses in Iran that the task based group “demonstrated a considerable and statistically significant improvement in the post-test performance” (1388) confirming Prahbu’s (1987) claims that students learn more effectively when focusing on a task rather than about the language itself (Mahmoudi & Amirkhiz, 2011:1392). Panahi (2012), also in Iran, shows that a task based approach, more so than a traditional syllabus, improved students’ listening (152). Further support for the task based syllabus includes Loumpourdi

(2005) who found TBLT was effective in Greece (a Present-Practice-Produce (PPP) & exam based culture) by teaching grammar to young students through the development of a personality quiz (33-39). Stark (2005) found that tasks were effective in Business English classes with university students in Switzerland, showing the difference between spoken and written English through group work presentations (40-49). Muller (2005) feels that tasks are a good starting point for 'false beginners' to practice speaking at private institutions in Japan in contrast to the typical PPP approach (69-77). While this limited amount of research shows promise, implementing a task based syllabus presents numerous challenges to the teacher, disadvantages to the student, and has received a significant amount of criticism which the following section will explore.

### **3.3 Weaknesses**

The task based syllabus can be appealing to the teacher wishing to create and encourage authentic language in the classroom. However, numerous arguments find flaws with a task based approach to syllabus design.

### **3.4 Definition**

One of the main concerns is that the definition, design and selection of tasks is so broad (Richards, 2001:162; Littlewood, 2007:247). Widdowson (2003) explains that the definition of task is so poorly defined that it does not distinguish itself from other classroom activities (126). To illustrate why this is a problem, Carless (2003) provides examples in the Asia-Pacific region where a task-based approach has proved difficult (485). He continues with specific details of a curriculum reform program in Hong Kong primary schools which used tasks as a basis of syllabus design. Tasks were badly differentiated from exercises and were therefore no different in practice than using a PPP model (486-487). In his conclusion, he calls for further investigation (498). Sheen (2004) reiterates this call, stating that advocates of the task based syllabus have not responded sufficiently to criticisms nor have they defended the basis for such a method (128), a sentiment echoed by many other scholars (Skehan, 1996, 1998; Candlin, 2001; Bruton, 2002; Swan, 2005).

In his critical assessment of task based instruction, Seedhouse (1999) found a lack of evidence in the form of teaching transcripts from any study on a task based program to support its claims (149-150).

His other arguments include how tasks constrain the turn-taking system (i.e. students answer each other formulaically, rather than naturally) (150-152), linguistic forms are minimized (152) and tasks “generate many instances of clarification requests, confirmation checks, comprehension checks, and self-repetitions”, producing task based interaction which has students producing their minimal amount of their linguistic competence (154).

### **3.5 Young Learners**

Another issue with the implementation of a task based syllabus is that of young learners. Van Den Branden (2006) provides an overview of why tasks may be incompatible with them:

Many teachers believe that the language input inherent in task-based activities (such as the instructions needed to perform information-gap tasks) is too complex for absolute beginners. Likewise, absolute beginners are thought to lack the basic speaking skills needed to exchange information, negotiate meaning or scaffold each others’ language output, all of which are supposed to ‘drive’ language learning according to task-based principles. In addition, some teachers believe it is impossible for second language learners to start using a language without explicitly knowing something about its simplest structures (syntax) and basic vocabulary first (47).

These problems with the basics of tasks are also felt by Littlewood (2007) who claims they are difficult for young learners and, among other issues, demand a minimal amount of language competence (245). Carless (2004) also found that tasks were too difficult for young learners and if the structures were not pre-taught, the students had no choice but to revert to the mother tongue (658). Van Den Branden (2007) concedes that task difficulty can to some extent be manipulated to allow a syllabus designer to gradually increase complexity (73) but would then also lead to difficulty sequencing and grading tasks by the teacher (74-75).

### **3.6 Response**

In a recent defense, Ellis (2013) answers the critics and their ‘misconceptions’ of TBLT. He addresses the claims that there is no clear definition of task; a lack of construct validity; promotes impoverished language use; is non-suitable for young learners; that TBLT neglects grammar; extensive use of group work; avoidance of the L1; and TBLT does not meet the needs of foreign language students (6-18). However, he admits that there is a problem with the difficulty, sequencing and grading of tasks.

Furthermore, teachers are often unclear of the concept of ‘task’ and are wary of adopting such a method that for one, does not prepare students for high stakes, grammar-intensive tests, and two, challenges the common notion of teacher as administrator (20-22). These latter two issues are extremely important in considering a teaching situation where a task based syllabus could be applied. The next section will examine these issues and the real world suitability of a task based syllabus and in which context, if any, it is best suited for.

#### **4.0 Considerations**

A task based syllabus requires a specific kind of classroom. While its assumptions and theories encourage natural language learning, in practice, this may prove difficult to implement and results in the unfortunate dilemma that no exact situation may be a perfect fit for teachers and students.

#### **4.1 Syllabus Design**

One of the best situations in which to implement a task based syllabus would be one where the teacher has the ability to create their own syllabus. This is problematic because the aforementioned needs analysis is critical in implementing a task based syllabus. By applying what is found in the needs analysis, the syllabus creator is able to tailor the program to the specific needs of the learners involved. This assumes that the teacher has the power to change the syllabus design of their classroom. The reality is that while some teachers have a hand in their teaching programs, most are “consumers” of others set forth by applied linguists or government agencies, and many feel that syllabus design should be done by those with specific expertise (Bell, 1983; Rahimpour, 2010:1662-1663; Nunan, 1987; Nunan, 1993:8). Moreover, many syllabus course designers base their syllabuses on two or three different types (Flowerdew, 2005:126). Therefore, a situation where a teacher has the ability to design their own task based syllabus would be best, but is unreasonable to expect.

#### **4.2 Concept of Task**

Another situation that would prove ideal for the implementation of a task based syllabus would be one in which instructors were familiar with the concept of task. As mentioned earlier, there is no absolute definition of task. Studies have shown this has led to confusion. Panahi (2011) in his research discerned that it was necessary for teacher and facilitator to understand tasks clearly in order for them

to be effective (152). Littlewood (2007) gives an example of how a task based program in Hong Kong led to many hours of arguments by those in charge over what a task was (247). Also in Hong Kong, Carless (2004) found teachers misinterpreting tasks, leading to behavioral and mother tongue problems (658). In an ideal environment, facilitators, teachers and students would have a clear concept of task and its uses. The reality, as shown, is that many teaching situations are unable to implement a task based syllabus effectively because the concept of task is still an issue.

### **4.3 Cultural Issues**

Task based learning often conflicts with educational values and traditions, particularly in East Asia, and is an important issue that must be considered (Littlewood, 2007). He gives examples of how Chinese teaching methods are often at odds with a task based approach because they are teacher-centered (245). Sato (2010) found in her study that TBLT does not take into account the Japanese learning environment, where PPP may still be more practical (198). This issue is quite common in South Korea as well, where students are accustomed to rote memorization, strict classroom roles, lack of oral skill, lack of useful learning strategies, and a large amount of family, school and social pressure (Duck & Finch, 1997:48). In a later study, Finch (2006) reiterates his concerns because South Korea remains an age-dominated hierarchy with group-driven mores which makes innovation extremely difficult. Also, TBLT can be seen as based on ‘western’ ideals and individual-centered values which do not conform to that of Asia (57). China as the largest segment of EFL learners and India’s huge population (Nunan, 2005:5) would seemingly make them ideal places for the implementation of a task based syllabus. The practicalities however make for huge difficulties in adopting such an approach.

### **4.4 Exams & Tests**

Exam centered syllabuses and cultures are often at odds with the implementation of task based syllabuses. In a perfect situation, tasks which are well chosen and centered around relevant content based syllabuses, implemented properly, with regard to the institutional context, could potentially reduce the need for excessive studying for tests and an exam based syllabus. However, too many students are concerned with rote memorization, passive and formulaic approaches from a teacher centered classroom leading to students working on an English “assembly line” (Nunan, 2005:6).

The reason task based syllabuses may not work in exam-based cultures like those found in Asia is the difficulty in grading tasks. Prabhu confirms that “no syllabus of generalized tasks can identify or anticipate all the sources of challenge to particular learners” (1987: 89). For a specific example, Finch (2006) describes that in contrast to stated education goals, South Korea still remains a test driven society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (41) and that students and teachers are both unhappy with the present situation and desire change; stating that task based learning is a step in the right direction (58-59). This desire to learn only what is needed to pass an exam is exemplified by teachers interviewed by Li (1998):

This exam [the National University Entrance Examination] has had tremendous influence on the English teaching in South Korea. As soon as students start middle school, they have a clear goal in mind—to pass the National University Entrance Examination. Teachers also have a clear goal in mind—to help students succeed in the Examination. Because it only tests students’ grammar knowledge and reading ability, both students and teachers are interested in grammar and reading in English classes. (Young-Cheol, July 26, 1995) (692).

Again, the situation that a task based syllabus is best suited for is far from the current paradigm in FL classrooms. As the evidence suggests, a task based syllabus would be incompatible with exam based cultures, precisely where it would seem to be the most useful based on theoretical research.

### **5.0 Best Suited Situation**

The best suited situation for a task based syllabus would be one where a well qualified, knowledgeable and motivated teacher had the ability to implement tasks in a learning environment that was accepting of non-traditional, learner centered syllabuses and did not have the pressure of an exam culture to teach for tests. Unfortunately, such ideal conditions are rare and therefore make the implementation of a task based syllabus difficult.

### **6.0 Conclusions**

This paper has explored the strengths and weaknesses of the task based syllabus in the foreign language classroom. The concept of task and task based teaching has a solid theoretical foundation, and in some cases has shown improvement with learners. However, the broad definition and difficulty grading are among some of the weaknesses encountered by course designers and teachers planning on implementing this type of syllabus. Finally, numerous barriers to adoption exist, particularly in Asia,

and therefore the best suited situation for a task based syllabus is often not applicable to most teaching situations.

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