TASK DESIGN

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ABSTRACT

This paper will examine the reasons why learners drop grammar or fail to attend to it. It will concern itself, therefore, with the factors involved in determining task-difficulty. It will also consider different classifications of criteria for task design and put forward proposals for the regulation of learner language through task design. The key with task-based learning is how to ensure a measure of regulation over learner activity, so that the acquisition of fluency is not developed at the expense of accuracy and interlanguage restructuring.

In recent years, some conception of task has been selected as the basic unit of analysis in different approaches and there has been a steady increase of interest in the use of task-based alternatives to second language teaching. Three new, task-based syllabus types appeared in the 1980's. These are (1) the Procedural Syllabus, (2) the Process Syllabus, and (3) Task-Based Language Teaching. They are all analytic, Type B syllabuses. With the adoption of task-based approaches, the emphasis is laid on learning processes rather than on the end products of these processes. Such approaches will be, therefore, means- rather than ends-based.

The term "task-based" certainly covers many different interpretations. So Long defines it as "a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward. Thus, examples of tasks include painting a fence, dressing a child, filling out a form, buying a pair of shoes (...) In other words, by 'task' is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play, and in between" (1985: 89). Richards, Platt and Platt offer the following definition: "an activity which is designed to help achieve a particular learning goal (...) such as using the telephone to obtain information, drawing maps based on oral instructions" (1992: 373). In contrast, Candlin's emphasis on the learners' learning preferences (as opposed to the language or language learning processes) and his social and problem-solving orientation leads him to the following notion of task: "one of a set of differentiated, sequenceable, problem-posing activities involving learners and teachers in some joint selection from

a range of varied cognitive and communicative procedures applied to existing and new knowledge in the collective exploration and pursuance of foreseen or emergent goals within a social milieu" (1987: 10). At the basis of Prabhu's definition, however, are tasks which engage the learner in thinking processes: "an activity which requires learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allows teachers to control and regulate that process" (1987: 24).

Our focus, it could be argued, is to guide learners into self-expression without losing sight of the grammar. Unfortunately, there are reasons why this beneficial process might not be so certain to occur. The personal experience of countless teachers will show that learners tend to avoid any engagement with the language system when focusing on the negotiation of meaning. Instead, they seem to revert to lexis. As Skehan (1991: 28) puts it, "language users and learners bypass syntax and use lexical strategies to enable them to keep up with communication in real-time when constrained by a limited capacity information-processing system". Consequently, many learners fail to reach target language competence and fossilization may occur. Learners stay at the lexical stage, and proceduralize an extremely impoverished language system, which is grammatically fossilized, since they believe that they do not need to develop their interlanguage any further in order to communicate effectively whatever they want to. Thus, such learners may have procedural skill, but very little development of procedural knowledge. They may achieve fluency, but not accuracy. Skehan's article (1991: 28) is again relevant in this regard, expressing that task-based grammar "runs the risk of consolidating these pressures for lexicalised communication, and as a result will underplay the role of accuracy and of interlanguage restructuring". This is the key issue connected with natural language use. Widdowson (1990: 163-4) summarizes his view in the following terms: "We do not want our learners to bypass language when they use it, as it is natural for native speakers to do, because they do not have the systemic knowledge as a backup resource to rely on. This is precisely what we want them to acquire and it is the purpose of pedagogy to assist them in acquiring it". In other words, native speakers are used to operating top-down. The emphasis is on paying as little attention as possible to language when they are dealing with something familiar. In a way, the systemic knowledge is put to the service of the schematic knowledge. But this is the danger: if a L2 learner interprets information through top-down processing, she may dispense with elements of grammar, as stated earlier, and fail to stretch her interlanguage. In contrast, we may find learners who are unwilling to take linguistic risks and are over-attentive to form. They are so cautious that they will never become fluent. These learners may have considerable procedural knowledge, but they cannot access that knowledge efficiently and automatically (i.e. they lack procedural skill).

In view of this, one might argue that the effectiveness of top-down processing has been overstressed, since it makes language to some extent redundant. The case for certain degrees of bottom-up processing may begin now. In my opinion, task-based grammar work should encourage learners to achieve both kinds of processing, and approach discourse in one way or the other depending on the specific circumstances.

Consequently, we will have to fashion our tasks very carefully. Learners may be given opportunities to use language in the task-based class. But unless regulated, learners will proceduralize a language system that is very reduced, and which may lead to fossilization and lack of interlanguage development. In Skehan's words, "requiring learners to engage in task-based learning may well, if not balanced by other

activities, lead to the use of comprehension and communication strategies, and encourage a performance-oriented approach to learning, with the result that fluency and synthesis are developed at the expense of accuracy and restructuring" (1991: 19).

It follows from this that the key issue is to direct that proceduralization. This raises an important question for language teaching . How do we set up opportunities for language use in the classroom that take advantage of interaction, while at the same time they have an element of directioning, so that we can regulate learners' activity towards accuracy and fluency? The answer, it seems to me, would lie in the achievement of balance between the competing requirements of both extremes. There is a continuum in terms of teaching. In an extreme product approach, everything is under control, whereas in extreme process teaching, learners seem to have total initiative. I would argue that neither extreme is satisfactory. We aim at a degree of balance: teachers can keep some control, while learners are using language in meaning-focused discourse. Learners are involved in tasks that direct them to negotiate meaning, that push them to create and take risks, while also encouraging them to work with grammar. As Batstone (1994) points out, these seem to be the ideal conditions for learners to notice, restructure and, particularly, proceduralize their grammar. In general terms, this is a position which is shared by a number of applied linguists, including Skehan, who concludes that "the key with task-based learning is how to preserve a controlled approach to language development, and ensure that the acquisition of fluency is not at the expense of development in structure" (1991: 20).

Therefore, there are dangers from taking a task-based approach to language teaching in unrestrained form. If "the potential of task-based language teaching for harnessing instructional and learning strategies consistent with second language acquisition research findings" (Long 1989: 20) is to be realized, careful attention, I believe, should be paid to the issue of the regulation of learner language through task design. How such regulation or 'controlled approach' might be achieved is a question which is considered in the next section.

The issue of grading is one of the central steps in syllabus design and it is vital, I would argue, with regard to the demand for balance and regulation raised earlier. As Skehan (1991: 20) puts it, "if tasks are pitched at the right level of difficulty, and if they fit into a pedagogic sequence, then there is more chance that they will drive forward more naturalistic acquisitional processes". Grading is generally determined by the degree of difficulty. It is sometimes assumed that grading content was a relatively straightforward business when syllabus designers dealt mainly with grammar. However, things become much more complicated once we look at the grading of tasks, since there is a number of factors at work which will impinge on task difficulty. Moreover, there is usually an interaction between these factors and characteristics of the learner (e.g. confidence, motivation, maturational level, cultural awareness, learning pace). Thus the role of the learner in relation to task difficulty is an important one and the assumption made by the task designer in this area can have an important effect. Applied linguists have devoted considerable attention to task difficulty, although the features they identify as significant in determining difficulty vary somewhat. They included "the number of steps involved in their execution, the number of parties involved, the assumptions they make about presupposed knowledge, the intellectual challenge they posed, their location (or not) in displaced space and time, and so on" (Long 1985: 93). We will also explore how different tasks make different demands upon the learner. Consequently, as Skehan (1991: 23) points out, task designers should

aim, I believe, for a variable balance between the pressures that come from the various task components.

As I have already indicated, there are different perspectives on task complexity. Brown and Yule (1983) have suggested that programmes of oral language skills can be graded with reference to four principal factors: speaker, intended listener, content and support. Each of these consists of a mixture of component features:

>–Speaker– number of speakers, speed of speech, familiarity of accent. In broad terms, the fewer the speakers, the easier it is for the listener to understand the language used. In the early stages, all speakers should speak a similar type of accent.

>–Intended listener– overhearer or participant, required level of response, individual interest in the topic. With regard to the intended listener, Brown and Yule recommend "doing a much wider variety of things in the listening comprehension class, and actively involving the listener in reacting to language rather than simply 'answering questions' on what he has overheard" (op. cit.: 83).

>–Content– grammar, vocabulary, information structure, assumed background knowledge or schemata. Brown and Yule admit that surprisingly little is known about what constitutes 'difficult' content. Task designers will need to look more closely at the role of schemata and how it interacts with language to create discourse.

>–Support– physical objects, visual aids (including video), and printed texts. It is pointed out that the more external support is offered to the listener, the easier the text will be to follow.

In considering speaking tasks, Brown and Yule propose that "taking short turns is generally easier than long turns. Talking to a familiar, sympathetic individual is less demanding than talking to an unfamiliar, uninvolved individual or group. Something one knows about and has well-organized in memory is naturally easier to talk about than a new topic or experience which has little organization in itself" (op. cit.: 107). Furthermore, they suggest that the text type or mode of speech will determine difficulty. They provide a general guide to level of difficulty, which includes the following factors: straight descriptions are easier than instructions, which will be easier than telling a story. Justifications of opinion will be the most difficult.

Anderson and Lynch (1988), who provide an overall perspective on listening as a language learning activity, distinguish a large number of factors which influence difficulty. However, they fall into three principal dimensions of listening: (a) the type of language the learner is listening to (i.e. the input); (b) the task or purpose in listening, and (c) the support provided by the listening context. In relation to the relevant features of listening input, they include the following: information organization; the familiarity of the listener with the topic; the explicitness of the information given, and the type of input. As far as the task is concerned, Anderson and Lynch suggest that different tasks present the listener with varying degrees of complexity. For example, tasks that involve an immediate response (e.g. drawing or ordering pictures) are easier

than those that require a process of listening and then selecting (e.g. summary). With regard to the third category, the listening context, they highlight the provision of visual support, ways of minimizing the information processing load and group work.

The Procedural Syllabus provides a different perspective on task design. The Bangalore Project emphasizes conceptual features and offers (see Prabhu 1987: 87-8) the following factors as likely to be significant in determining difficulty:

1. Information provided– The amount and type of information handled will affect difficulty.

2. Reasoning needed– The number of steps or cognitive operations (e.g. deduction, inference or calculation) will affect difficulty.

3. Precision needed– Difficulty increases with the degree of precision called for.

4. Familiarity with constraints– Learners' knowledge of the world and familiarity with purposes and constraints will affect difficulty.

5. Degree of abstractness– Working with concepts is more difficult than working with the namesof objects or actions.

Long (1987) claims that one-way tasks should precede two-way tasks, that convergent tasks should precede divergent ones and that tasks in the 'here and now' should precede those involving displaced time and space. Long also considers conceptual features and proposes that intellectual content should be a factor in grading and sequencing criteria (Long 1985: 93; Crookes and Long 1992: 45).

Nunan (1985) presents a typology of activities which can be graded according to the cognitive and performance demands made upon the learner. Candlin and Nunan (1987) also suggest that complexity is determined by the cognitive demands activities make. They propose a scheme, which consists of four levels: (1) Attending and recognising (i.e. the learner's ability to notice what kind of input / experience she is being confronted with and to recognise that it is a sample of language); (2) making sense of the input as a particular example of language; (3) going beyond the information given (e.g. hypothesising, inferring and making judgements about the underlined meanings of a text); (4) transferring and generalising the information obtained from a text to other texts that may be of other quite different structure. In this list, therefore, task difficulty will depend on the cognitive operations the learner has to perform.

In contrast, Candlin (1987) proposes six features which may be used when tasks are graded. As Skehan (1991: 20) puts it, "Candlin's list is extremely valuable since it implies that there are six areas in which task variation occurs, potentially independently, and these six areas may have an impact on the nature of processing and learning that takes place when tasks are used". In the list which follows, cognitive operations, as we shall see, are only one of the factors involved.

–Cognitive Load– It refers to the complexity of the mental operation to be carried out. Candlin notes, for example, that tasks which require learners to follow a clear chronological sequence will be easier than a task in which there is no such clear development.

–Communicative Stress– The concern here is with the stress caused by the context, which will be influenced by such things as the learner's knowledge of the topic, number of interlocutors, communicative competence of the inter-locutors and relationship with the other participants in the interaction.

–Particularity and Generalisability– It is concerned with the extent to which the tasks follow a universal or stereotyped pattern. For instance, asking some-one original questions about hypothesised future events is likely to pose a more difficult task than the recounting of familiar experience.

–Code Complexity and Interpretative Density– Candlin refers to the complex-ity of the language particularly in terms of the sorts of processing constraints described by SLA researchers and the extent to which the learners are required to interpret what they hear or read. Here we might want to play off linguistic complexity against task difficulty. For example, we might decide, with linguis-tically elaborated texts, to ask more straightforward questions, while with tex-tually simple text asking questions which required the interpretative and ex-planatory analysis of the learner.

–Content Continuity– It is concerned with the extent to which the content re-lates to the real-world interests or needs of the learners. Candlin points out that although such a task design procedure has clear apparent advantages in terms of target authenticity, there are also rejections on the part of some profession-als because of their non-verisimilitude.

–Process Continuity– It concerns the coherence, continuity and inter-relatedness of tasks. Learners should be encouraged to construct their own continuity and to organize their own learning orders by examining what needs to be known and experienced before a more complex task can be achieved.

However, it seems to me that what is needed is an explanation of the inter-rela-tionships established between the different sets of features, and not just lists of fac-tors. In this vein, Skehan presents a practical scheme, clearly linked to Candlin's proposal, "but which indicates internal organization a little more clearly, connects with theory and practice, and provides a more practical method of decision making about task difficulty" (Skehan 1991: 21). Skehan (op.cit.: 21) suggests that the fol-lowing elements will determine the complexity of what the learner has to do:

–Code Complexity
linguistic complexity and variety
vocabulary load and variety
redundancy
density

–Communicative Stress or Pressure
time limits and time pressure
speed of presentation
number of participants
length of texts used
type of response
opportunities to control interaction

–Cognitive Complexity
Cognitive Processing
    information organization
    amount of "computation"
    clarity of information given
    sufficiency of information given
    information type
Cognitive Familiarity
    familiarity of topic and its predictability
    familiarity of discourse genre
    ease of relationship to background knowledge
    familiarity of task.

The first component is concerned with code features; the second with performance criteria, and the third with conceptual factors. These are the most relevant features, together with affective factors, I believe, for task design and for the kind of regulation we are pursuing. I will now outline a framework, which is obviously connected with Skehan's scheme, but which also borrows and adapts from various other classifications of criteria for task design (Brown and Yule 1983; Prabhu 1987; Long 1989, and Batstone 1994).

CODE FEATURES

This category refers to the difficulty of the language system required to complete a task, and it will be determined, to a large extent, by the way in which performance and cognitive criteria inter-relate. Skehan (1991: 22) points out that code features are "concerned with the actual target, on the one hand, i.e. restructuring and interlanguage development, and also have a task difficulty influence, on the other". We are encouraging learners to think of the quality of the language they are using (i.e. self-monitoring). But of course it will depend on the individual learners.

PERFORMANCE FEATURES

This second area relates to the way task is transacted. Following Skehan (1991: 22), "it concerns how real-time pressures influence communication, and the extent to which learners are drawn into using language at a speed beyond the one at which they are comfortable". Language use is then pressured, since it involves a multi-

plicity of simultaneous skills. Thus, one of the key factors which determine why learners fail to call on their existing grammar in language use is communicative pressure. As Batstone (1994) points out, task designers will have to contrive ways of regulating it, so as to get learners to attend to grammar. Learners will perform more or less accurately depending on different factors. One solution is to give learners time to plan out and organize their discourse prior to expression. Two relevant studies on this subject will be reviewed here. In the first one, Ellis (1987) investigated the performance of seventeen intermediate L2 learners of English on three related tasks all involving story telling, and which focused on the use of three past tense morphemes (regular past, irregular past, and past copula). Data were collected under three conditions: (a) planned writing, (b) planned speech, and (c) unplanned speech. Thus the three tasks provided learners with progressively less planning time. The results of the study show that the amount of planning time available to the learner has a systematic effect on accuracy levels. However, performance on the regular and irregular past tense verbs differs markedly. As far as regular past tense forms are concerned, there is a decrease in accuracy from 77% (Task 1), to 57% (Task 2), to 43% (Task 3). But for the irregular past tense, accuracy levels remained more or less constant across the three tasks (the results being 60%, 57%, and 55%). For the past copula, the accuracy levels on the first two tasks were almost identical, but on Task 3 they were markedly lower (76%, 75%, 60%). One possible explanation for these findings is that the irregular past tense forms constitute a distinct lexical item in the learner's interlanguage and have to be learnt as separate tokens. They are either known or not known and many of the forms are also used frequently. In contrast, the regular past tense is constructed according to a relatively uncomplicated rule. When planning time is reduced, learners are likely to resort to the irregular past, which is unmarked as opposed to the regular past form; when they have more opportunity to plan their discourse, they can effectively apply the rule for regular past. On the basis of the Ellis study, Skehan (1991: 11) concludes that "manipulation of task conditions affects planning time, which in turn, influences the balance between lexical and syntactic performance".

The second study I referred to is that of Crookes (1989). He reports on an experiment in which two groups of twenty Japanese learners of English as a second language performed two monologic production tasks with and without time for planning. Results did not show significant differences in relation to accuracy between minimal planning and planning conditions. Crookes, however, found that the subjects who operated under conditions of planning produced a wider variety of lexis and of syntax. The language they produced in the planned condition was more complex (e.g. greater number of words and subordinate clauses per utterance, longer subordinate clauses). These results lead Crookes to conclude that L2 learners can use planning time to take risks and produce more developed speech.

To summarize, then, there is evidence that planning time reduces pressure and also has an effect on task performance. The analysis of Ellis' and Crookes' research designs presented above shows the relevance of planning, and how performance factors may result in more complex interlanguage production. However, it can be argued that there is not always direct correlation between more preparation time and better language. I tend to think that it is a question of getting to know your learners. Thus, this is linked up to individual learner differences. Variation of time will depend on the individual learners and their culture. The 'process' teacher is a listener: she uses prepa-

ration time to guide learners to the key points. Ultimately, it is the teacher who has to determine the optimum amount of planning time for each learner.

Once we have asserted the major effect of planning on the degree learners deploy their grammar, it would be interesting for teachers to explore its influence on the accuracy - fluency balance. In this sense, Skehan (1991: 26) draws a distinction between those learners who may engage in linguistic preparation during planning time, and those who may focus on the meanings they want to convey. Task designers, therefore, should take into consideration the type of activity that learners engage in during planning time. As Batstone (1994) points out, it is not our aim to have learners who are over-dependent on preparation time. We should think of ways of progressively reducing the time available for preparation across the course and moving towards everyday, real-time language performance. Moreover, the studies by Ellis and Crookes reviewed earlier required subjects to produce monologues. One could argue that planning time could be less efficient for interactive tasks. In interactions, what interlocutors say is unpredictable, and the longer the interaction, the more unpredictable it is. Learners will need to explore their repertoire in order to express ideas for which they have not been specifically prepared. We can help learners to cope with varying degrees of predictability in language use by regulating class interaction. Learners, for example, can be given time to prepare a role-play; while they are engaged in their preparation or during the actual performance, the teacher may inject different, unexpected information, so that learners have to make some adjustments. In this way, learners are encouraged to access their grammar under pressure.

We have discussed time pressure extensively here. However, performance features include several other factors, such as number of participants in the task; the types of tasks learners work on (e.g. the one-way / two-way distinction); interaction between task type and group-work, type of response required (e.g. a public performance at the end of the task), and the channel (either spoken or written. Speaking tasks are normally considered to be more pressured that writing tasks).

CONCEPTUAL FEATURES

Following Skehan, conceptual features are concerned with "how much mental activity is involved in the construction of the underlying meanings that need to be expressed, with the basic idea that the more attention that is required in this domain, the less attention can be devoted to the formal elements of the message" (1991: 22).

Consider, for instance, the following task taken from *The Cambridge English Course, Practice Book 1* (Swan and Walter 1984: 124):

> In the car, the police find a diamond necklace, a valuable painting and a fur coat. The police find out that they belong to a film star, a businessman and a doctor. The diamonds don't belong to the doctor. The coat doesn't belong to the businessman. The painting belongs to a woman. The film star never wears fur coats. Who does the painting belong to?

Learners, in this case, might feel under pressure. They need to think actively, discuss and evaluate these facts in order to solve the problem. In these activities,

learners must not only analyse information, but also reason, argue, justify and persuade, so as to reach a common decision, even though the existence of a single correct answer in this task offers learners, I believe, less scope to express their own individuality through the foreign language. These tasks require the use of language for the solution of the problem and, as discussed earlier, we all know that grammar is one of the first things to be dropped when under pressure. I would agree with Skehan when he says that "the greater the cognitive load, the smaller the attention left over for planning in general, and attention to form, in particular" (1991: 23).

It follows from this that task designers can regulate the cognitive pressure by varying the familiarity of the topic, so that learners can devote more time to the quality of the language produced. An illustration would include the following tasks:

-*Interview another student. Find out five things you have got in common.*

-*Imagine that you are at the town centre in your home town. Explain to one another where your house is.*

-*Draw a plan of your partner's house.*

In these task-based activities, learners are under less pressure and have the opportunity to deploy their grammar more elaborately, since they can easily draw on their existing schematic knowledge in order to complete the task. Learners experience, therefore, a sense of familiarity with what will follow, which in turn will give them a greater feeling of security.

Other ways in which familiarity can be manipulated is through selecting the task type, the discourse genre, information given, the setting, the specific roles of teachers and learners, etc., and making them more or less familiar to the learners.

However, working on a familiar context does not necessarily equate with language development. There is always the danger that learners lack the motivation to stretch their language. We could argue that tasks "must represent a worthwhile challenge for the language learner -not too difficult so that achieving meaning at any cost predominates, and not too simple, in which case nothing is being learnt or developed" (Skehan 1991: 20). The conceptual level is, then, crucial. There are obvious dangers in designing tasks which are either too easy or difficult, since students may sabotage the activity (see Widdowson 1990: 190 for further discussion). In this context, we could suggest varying the degree of familiarity across the course or even within a single lesson. Another possibility, much favoured in current coursebooks, is the combination of topic familiarity and planning time available. Examples in this area would be the following tasks:

Write about the Eskimos' traditional way of life
(planned writing on an unfamiliar topic to some groups of learners).

Talk about a journey that you have made
(unplanned speech of a familiar topic).

Therefore, we need to clarify the respective roles of time pressure and cognitive demands. It is important to explore if they are equally important and to what extent their regulation affects the quality of learners' language. Clearly research is needed, then, to show how the different aspects of task design interact.

But learners may dispense with aspects of grammar for other reasons. A poor task is one where knowledge is shared from the beginning and there is little need for language to be used. In other words, there is inadequate regulation of "context gap" (i.e. the conceptual gap between the knowledge which learners have at the outset of the task and the one they need through to its conclusion). In contrast, the less shared schemata, the more work is needed to complete the task (i.e. the more learners will have to converge in their language). For instance, if you give learners minimal contextual clues (e.g. a few pictures), they must create more ideas of their own: they are encouraged to verbalise, grammaticize more. But it will also depend on the learner. Every code is culture-dependent as well as context-dependent. One cannot always presume what the shared context will be between learners. Thus task designers will have to bear in mind the issue of the individual's knowledge of the world.

As I pointed out earlier, we have to design tasks which require learners to access grammar for some purpose (i.e. for the expression of meaning). Let us consider the following task (Swan and Walter 1984: 104):

Mr Andrews is an English tourist who is travelling to Eastern Europe tomorrow. Just now he is having breakfast at home. After breakfast, he's going out to do a lot of things. Look at these pictures, and then tell where he's going and why.

Here learners are expected to use the Present Progressive and the infinitive of purpose. However, there is no context gap built into the task, since aspects such as the tense and information about the character involved are explicitly made clear from the outset. Consequently, there is no reason or motivation to activate elements of grammar which might be communicatively redundant. Instead, as I indicated earlier, the learner may simply revert to a fossilized lexical system and fail to proceduralize her grammar. However, this is something which all competent speakers do. There is always an element of mutually shared knowledge in language use. Schemata allow human communication to be economical. It would be difficult to imagine how communication could take place, if every discourse had to begin from scratch. But it may be dangerous to encourage an over-dependence on schematic knowledge on the part of learners, as suggested in the preceding section. As Widdowson (1990: 86) explains, "the greater the contribution of context in the sense of shared knowledge and experience, the less need there is for grammar to augment the association of words. The less effective the words are in identifying relevant features of context in that sense, the more dependent they become on grammatical modification of one sort or another. And (...) where there can be no possibility of shared contextual knowledge, (...) grammar provides the guarantee of individual conceptual freedom". So the purpose of building in a context gap in task-based activities is to get learners to use language in order to find out about things or sort out ambiguities. The participants are then set a task which can only be solved if they activate grammar (see Widdowson 1990: 138).

Some researchers take into account other conceptual features. The framework I have proposed might be extended with factors such as the number of steps required for the completion of a task and the degree of precision needed (see Prabhu 1987).

AFFECTIVE FEATURES

The fourth category I would like to mention includes not only the learners' personality, but also cultural factors. Learners will bring to the language they are learning the wealth of their own individuality and culture. ESL/EFL teachers must be particularly sensitive to this issue. The available research shows that different personality variables (e.g. extroversion / introversion, social skills, inhibition) are important factors in the promotion of communicative and linguistic abilities. Moreover, task designers can regulate the selection of topics in coursebooks. Topics often cause learners difficulties by the mismatch of the background knowledge presupposed by the text and the background knowledge our learners possess. Teachers can become further sensitized to the relationship between topics and the individual learner's culture. How far does the topic have learners in mind? How do learners feel about taboo topics?

The above-mentioned categories are always present in language use. Therefore, any proposal for the regulation of learner language through task design will have to consider these parameters and the inter-relationships established between them, especially where performance and conceptual criteria are concerned.

Having examined in some detail the various features of task design, I shall now turn to how we can achieve a balance between the competing pressures in actual task performance. As Skehan puts it, "(...) we can go beyond task sequencing considera-

tions, and also consider how a task-based approach to teaching can be implemented more or less effectively at the methodological level" (1991: 24). In other words, we will now explore what might be called "the task cycle": we will look at ways of regulating language use before, during and after the task, each of which containing choices which the task designer can make. The steps are as follows:

BEFORE THE TASK (OR, ACCORDING TO SKEHAN 1991, "PRE-EMPTIVE LANGUAGE WORK").

It is concerned with preparation prior to the task itself. Prabhu's Bangalore Project is consistent, in my opinion, with this view. Each lesson consists of two stages: a pre-task and a task. Prabhu himself (1987: 55) summarizes both phases in the following way: "the pre-task and task pattern divides a lesson desirably into an initial period of whole-class activity, teacher-direction and oral interaction and a later period of sustained self-dependent effort by learners sustained reading (or sustained listening, when the task is presented orally by the teacher) and some writing". In the pre-task activities, learners 'rehearse' to some extent what they will do in the task-based phase. The pre-task enables the teacher to judge the cognitive demands of the activity and, if necessary, simplify it. Critics of the Procedural Syllabus often claim that pre-task activities "contained a surrogate language teaching focus, and so prepared learners for the less structured situation to come" (Skehan 1991: 25).

There are degrees in relation to the preparatory work which can be realized before the actual task is done in the classroom. Teachers might analyse the grammatical structures that will be required, and so carry out language-based preparation. It is argued that this would enhance the chances of internalisation of the language. However, others advocate meaning-focused activities prior to the class. One should not pre-teach language before the tasks, since that would represent a shift towards a 'product' lesson, and learners' ability to express their own meanings would be seriously hindered.

As Skehan (1991: 25) concludes, "whatever the position in this specific situation, ... the more important point is that tasks could take their place in a wider teacher progression, and that learners in such circumstances would not come to them 'cold' but would have been prepared with relevant language, with the transaction of the task enabling the newly-acquired language to be used communicatively and meaningfully".

Nonetheless, I tend to think there are difficulties in the combination of language-based preparation and meaning-focused activities. Further, such a teaching sequence may not be easy to achieve. The teacher cannot know exactly what language the learners will use when encouraged to concentrate on the communication of meanings, and so prediction is not an easy task. I would argue, then, for the use of meaning-focused activities which can be organized before the task itself, and for product-oriented activities which can run parallel and more or less independently. In my opinion, background information could also be provided before the task itself, together with explanations of high-frequency but culturally loaded terms.

DURING THE TASK (REFERRED TO AS "TASK-CONTROL APPROACHES" BY SKEHAN 1991).

As discussed earlier, tasks can be regulated in order to reduce the performance and cognitive demands made on the learner. Therefore, learners may be given more or less pre-task planning time; on some other occasions, learners may be told how quickly

they have to perform. With regard to the cognitive features, Skehan (1991) suggests that learners should practise the task, or at least elements from it, "so that the task itself progressively draws upon more familiar elements" (op.cit.: 26). As I have already mentioned, teachers will also take into account questions related to the distribution of shared knowledge. How much do learners know and, consequently, do not need to express? How much do they need to share in order to do the task? I would argue that another kind of regulation 'during' the task which is highly relevant is the one referring to the distinction between "convergent" and "divergent" tasks, which links to differences in cognitive style. Convergers are those learners who tend to conform and feel at ease with closed tasks. Divergers, on the contrary, think laterally and might feel uncomfortable with closed tasks; they prefer degrees of deviation and favour open tasks, so that they have scope to consider many possible solutions. One can argue, however, that reasonably most learners have degrees of convergence and divergence. This factor is, then, a strength in the classroom. If a teacher has a group of learners who always try to converge, she may build up divergent activities, so that learners are pushed forward to operate at the ultimate level of their possibilities. So two different tasks are distinguished:

Convergent tasks

They require learners to agree on a solution, but it is their own (as opposed to closed tasks). They are supposed to produce a rich use of interpersonal strategies for clarifying meaning and a great number of short turns. However, it seems to me, there is not a great deal of evidence that language is pushed, risks are being taken and new structures are tried out. In a way, we are solidifying knowledge but, at least in theory, there is no language stretching. One could argue that the less learners stretch their interlanguage, the less potential there is for further learning. Process regulation, nonetheless, provides the teacher with the opportunity to build some degree of divergence into a convergent task at the outset.

Divergent tasks

There is an on-going constraint on learners to remain apart from each other. In this sense, one solution in a debate is to assign learners different viewpoints on an issue before the task begins, so that learners diverge from each other. This will provide them with a framework on which to build their opinions and it can also be used by the teacher for the regulation of pressure in the classroom. I would argue that divergent tasks have very positive ramifications for the quality of language which is used. There is more chance for learners to stretch their language, both lexically and syntactically and at the level of discourse. There are also longer turns. Divergent tasks will encourage more lengthened sentences and more complex language.

AFTER THE TASK ("RETROSPECTIVE APPROACHES TO TASK IMPLEMENTATION", SKEHAN 1991).

Skehan (1991) refers to the effect on doing a task of what happens afterwards, and suggests to build into the actual task a 'post'-task public performance, so that learners are encouraged to attend not only to fluency but also to accuracy because of the performance in front of other students which is to come. Learners have the con-

straint that there will be a public product in the shape of, for example, a videotape, which may be seen by others. It is likely that the learner's knowledge of what is still required will influence the nature of actual task performance.

One of the problems with task-based teaching is that learners may still have a product view of the learning/teaching process and of the roles teachers and learners play in the classroom. Therefore, teachers may get some resistance on the part of the learners. The answer is always negotiation. However, one could argue that one way of providing a rationale for task-based grammar activity is via reflection acts. That is, tasks which require learners to reflect critically on the quality of their own and other learners' language and consider possible improvement for themselves. It is claimed that learners may feel strongly motivated to consider their performance because it is the product of their own task-based work (see Skehan 1991, Batstone 1994). But good, critical reflection is a skilled activity, which needs practice and careful guidance. Furthermore, it is face-threatening and may just add to the other pressures. Learners may feel their own language being scrutinised in public. Somehow, then, teachers need to teach reflection skills in a non-threatening way, so that learners do not feel exposed to criticism (e.g. give learners someone else's piece of writing and let them reflect on it without knowing the person).

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