Task-in, Task-out

Re-defining the Task-centred Approach to CLT

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(Received October 31, 2011)

When the Ministry of Education in Japan (MEXT: 2003) placed the emphasis of English education on " situations where students can communicate with each other in English ", and exhorted teachers to have their students " make us of English ", many high school and junior high school English teachers were left scratching their heads as to how they were to achieve this. Luckily, the Ministry of Education had the answer, recommending " activities making use of English as a means of communication ". One way of achieving this is by planning lessons based on tasks, and it just so happened that the approach to ELT in vogue in Europe at that time was known as " Task-based Learning ". This paper reviews the history of TBL(T), with particular attention to the Asian context, and offers a paradigm which might be more acceptable in such a context.

What is a " Task " ?

Nunan (2004:1-2) differentiates between two types of task, target tasks and pedagogical tasks. Following the opinion of Long (1985), he sees " target tasks " as having non-linguistic outcomes, and closely resembling the types of activity that are typically carried out in the real world. He contrasts these with what he terms " pedagogical tasks ". Drawing from Richards et al (1986), Willis (1996), Skehan (1998) and Ellis (2003), he sees a pedagogical task as one emphasising the importance of meaning over form, and which can " stand alone as a communicative act in its own right, with a beginning, a middle and an end " (Nunan 2004:4). While earlier forms of TBL emphasised the superiority of so-called " target tasks ", opinion has since softened. In this paper, both types of task are regarded as acceptable, with the so-called " pedagogical tasks " being perhaps the easier of the two to put into practice. The introduction of the so-called " weaker form " of TBL, in which pedagogical tasks are acceptable is becoming more commonplace. Carless (2003) sees these tasks as similar to the production stage of a PPP-based lesson.

The Rise and Fall of Task-based Learning

Since Willis (1996) set out her " framework " for task-based learning (see figure 1), TBL has become something of a *de facto* orthodoxy in contemporary ELT, at least in Europe. To a large extent TBL was a reaction to the so-called " PPP paradigm " of presentation, practice and production, which Willis (1996:135) saw as merely a development of

earlier behaviourist models of language learning. She emphasized that TBL offered " far more opportunities for free language use ", and claimed that its focus on form stage was " far richer ". While it makes clear sense to re-define CLT in a way that emphasizes the importance of the task, one cannot help but feel that the proponents of TBL were guilty of " preaching to the choir ", and the traditional PPP approach they railed against (with its rigid structure of teacher-centred presentation, quasi-Pavlovian practice phase, and " free " production activity tacked on at the end) had already been long left behind by many ELT professionals when Willis' book was published.

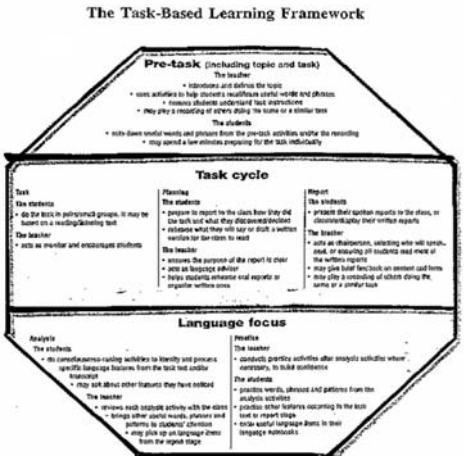

Figure 1 (Source Willis 1996)

More importantly, TBL has received rather a bad press in Asia. Jeon & Hahn (2006), for example, found that Korean secondary school teachers, while appreciating the value of TBL in making their classes more interactive, were somewhat skeptical of its overall value especially in the light of large classroom size, and their perceptions of their own English ability

Despite being an enthusiastic advocate of task-based learning and teaching, Ellis (2003: 332) is sensitive to the danger that the approach may be " culturally loaded ", and is especially cautious about its applicability to Asian contexts. He goes on to admit that it " implies a particular cultural context that may be in conflict with cultural contexts where learning is not seen as a collaborative and experiential activity. " It is for reasons such as this one, that teachers may have more success with the " pedagogical tasks " mentioned earlier. Similarly, Carless, skeptical of the extent to which TBL in Hong Kong adheres to the standard model, prefers Ellis' phrase " task-supported teaching " (Ellis, 2003). Indeed, Willis (2006) herself has been heard to use the term " Activity-based Language Learning ", especially in the context of " less confident teachers " and young learners.

This paper does not aim to advocate a return to PPP, but rather to re-define task-centred learning in a form that might be more palatable to ELT professionals in Asia, especial-

ly non-native speakers of English.

The " TITO " Paradigm

Pre-input Activity (e.g. vocabulary matching or gap-fill, picture-based prediction activity, (pre-questions)

Input Task
(Usually listening or reading-based)

Feedback from Input Task./Pre-output Activity
(Comprehension check, extraction (and practice) of useful language.

Output Task 1
(Usually speaking-based)

Feedback from Output Task.

Output Task 2
(Usually writing-based—Feedback in next class)

Figure **2** The TiTo Framework

One of the strengths of PPP was its clear format, making it ideal for new teachers. As Ellis (2006) points out, " access to a clear framework for a task-based lesson is of obvious advantage to both teachers and learners. " This is echoed by Jeon & Hahn (2006) who point out that teachers implementing TBLT in Asia are " required to have sufficient knowledge of the instructional framework related to its plan, procedure, and assessment. " Indeed one of the problems of TBL is that for many teachers, it is baffling in its complexity. Similarly, speaking specifically about the situation in Japan, Burrows (2008) warns that " a teaching approach which places too heavy a burden on students is not only unrealistic but unreasonable. "

In contrast with traditional PPP, which moves gradually from a teacher-centred presentation to a more student-centred production phase, and with TBL, which places the task at the forefront, followed by a focus on form, the " Task-in, Task-out " paradigm, suggested in this paper, organizes the learning period around two main tasks. The first is an input task, the second is an output task (see fig. 2). Pre-task activities are likely to precede each major task, with the option of focus on form and practice of target structures likely to fall somewhere between the two, and at the discretion of the teacher. All this might be clearer with some examples, one at university level, the other based on a junior high school text

Example 1 (Based on Headway Intermediate, p.36)

Pre-input Activity One: Lexis on food and countries.

Pre-input Activity Two: Prediction (discussion on what they might expect if they were invited to a party in Brazil/England/Japan).

Input Task (**Listening**): Listen to the speakers from the three countries mentioned above and make notes about type of party, food and drink served, presents given, etc.

Feedback: Check comprehension—extract language of interest (can use typescript, if needed).

Pre-Output Activity: Set parameters of task. Practise language if required.

Output Task One: Planning the " Perfect Party ". Students in groups of four, discuss, agree, and make notes.

Output Task Two. Make invitations (homework).

Output Task Three: Present party plans in new groups (following class).

Example 2 (Based on New Horizon 2, pp.52-53)

Pre-input Activity One: Gap-fill activity using target vocabulary on p.52

Pre-input Activity Two: Prediction (teacher shows enlarged versions of the pictures on p.52. Students predict content).

Input Task 1 (**Running Dictation**): The article on p. 52 is cut into strips, and stuck around the room. Students work in pairs to read remember, and dictate the strips, then arrange in the correct order.

Feedback: Students open books to check. Teacher checks comprehension, and carries out feedback, drawing attention to target language.

Input Task 2 (**Gap-fill Activity**): Teacher gives students a version of the " Opinions " article on p.53 with the target vocabulary gapped out. Students work alone, then check in pairs.

Feedback: Students open books to check. Teacher checks comprehension, and carries out feedback, drawing attention to target language.

Pre-Output Activity: Set parameters of task. Practise language if required.

Output Task One: Students work in groups of four. They are given a set of (four, eight?) " Plan cards " One student turns over a card, and reads the plan. The other three students say if they are for or against the plan, giving reasons, and using language similar to that on page 53.

Output Task Two. Students are given another plan. They write their response. (homework).

It is clear that these two brief lesson plans were devised based on course books without any form of TBL in mind (though the former does often involve tasks). Indeed, while the traditional TBL framework may be difficult to apply to existing text-books, this approach lends itself quite easily to a wide range of course texts, even those sanctioned by the Ministry of Education.

Conclusion

While the approach to lesson-planning outlined above may not be radical, it does offer a number of advantages when used in an Asian context.

- It offers the potential for a far greater amount of input than the PPP format. This is especially true if teachers build a library of interesting and suitable reading and listening texts, at the right level for their students, or use a modern communicative course book with such input built in.
- It avoids the somewhat confusing " listening " activities in traditional TBL, which consist of native speakers navigating the task in a language way beyond the comprehension of most students.
- It includes both input and output tasks (ideally based on the same topic area).
- It is, in the words of Ellis (2006) " a clear framework ", while remaining flexible.
- It involves less uncertainty, making it suitable in an Asian educational setting.

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