

Task types

There are as many different task types as there are people who have written on task-based language teaching. In this section, I do not have space to deal exhaustively with them all, and so have chosen several to describe and illustrate.

One of the earliest curricular applications of TBLT to appear in the literature was the Bangalore project. In this project, three principal task types are used: information gap, reasoning gap, and opinion gap.

1. Information-gap activity, which involves a transfer of given information from one person to another – or from one form to another, or from one place to another – generally calling for the decoding or encoding of information from or into language. One example is pair work in which each member of the pair has a part of the total information (for example an incomplete picture) and attempts to convey it verbally to the other. Another example is completing a tabular representation with information available in a given piece of text. The activity often involves selection of relevant information as well, and learners may have to meet criteria of completeness and correctness in making the transfer.
2. Reasoning-gap activity, which involves deriving some new information from given information through processes of inference, deduction, practical reasoning, or a perception of relationships or patterns. One example is working out a teacher's timetable on the basis of given class timetables. Another is deciding what course of action is best (for example cheapest or quickest) for a given purpose and within given constraints. The activity necessarily involves comprehending and conveying information, as an information-gap activity, but the information to be conveyed is not identical with that initially comprehended. There is a piece of reasoning which connects the two.
3. Opinion-gap activity, which involves identifying and articulating a personal preference, feeling, or attitude in response to a given situation. One example is story completion; another is taking part in the discussion of a social issue. The activity may involve using factual information and formulating arguments to justify one's opinion, but there is no objective procedure for demonstrating outcomes as right or wrong, and no reason to expect the same outcome from different individuals or on different occasions.

(Prabhu 1987: 46–7)

Another typology that appeared at about the same time was that proposed by Pattison (1987), who sets out seven task and activity types.

Questions and answers

These activities are based on the notion of creating an information gap by letting learners make a personal and secret choice from a list of language items which all fit into a given frame (e.g. the location of a person or object). The aim is for learners to discover their classmates' secret choice. This activity can be used to practise almost any structure, function or notion.

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Dialogues and role plays

These can be wholly scripted or wholly improvised. However, 'If learners are given some choice of what to say, and if there is a clear aim to be achieved by what they say in their role plays, they may participate more willingly and learn more thoroughly than when they are told to simply repeat a given dialogue in pairs'.

Matching activities

Here, the task for the learner is to recognize matching items, or to complete pairs or sets. 'Bingo', 'Happy families' and 'Split dialogues' (where learners match given phrases) are examples of matching activities.

Communication strategies

These are activities designed to encourage learners to practise communication strategies such as paraphrasing, borrowing or inventing words, using gesture, asking for feedback and simplifying.

Pictures and picture stories

Many communication activities can be stimulated through the use of pictures (e.g. spot the difference, memory test, sequencing pictures to tell a story).

Puzzles and problems

Once again, there are many different types of puzzles and problems. These require learners to 'make guesses, draw on their general knowledge and personal experience, use their imagination and test their powers of logical reasoning'.

Discussions and decisions

These require the learner to collect and share information to reach a decision (e.g. to decide which items from a list are essential to have on a desert island).

More recently, Richards (2001: 162) has proposed the following typology of pedagogical tasks:

- *jigsaw tasks* These tasks involve learners in combining different pieces of information to form a whole (e.g. three individuals or groups may have three different parts of a story and have to piece the story together).

- *information-gap tasks* These are tasks in which one student or group of students has one set of information and another student or group has a complementary set of information. They must negotiate and find out what the other party's information is in order to complete an activity.
- *problem-solving tasks* Students are given a problem and a set of information. They must arrive at a solution to the problem. There is generally a single resolution of the outcome.
- *decision-making tasks* Students are given a problem for which there are a number of possible outcomes and they must choose one through negotiation and discussion.
- *opinion exchange tasks* Learners engage in discussion and exchange of ideas. They do not need to reach agreement.

All of these typologies are based on an analysis of communicative language use. An alternative method of classifying tasks is to group them according to the strategies underpinning them. The following scheme proposes five different strategy types: cognitive, interpersonal, linguistic, affective and creative.

COGNITIVE CLASSIFYING	Putting things that are similar together in groups Example: Study a list of names and classify them into male and female
PREDICTING	Predicting what is to come in the learning process Example: Look at the unit title and objectives and predict what will be learned
INDUCING	Looking for patterns and regularities Example: Study a conversation and discover the rule for forming the simple past tense
TAKING NOTES	Writing down the important information in a text in your own words
CONCEPT MAPPING	Showing the main ideas in a text in the form of a map
INFERCING	Using what you know to learn something new
DISCRIMINATING	Distinguishing between the main idea and supporting information



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DIAGRAMMING	Using information from a text to label a diagram
INTERPERSONAL CO-OPERATING	Sharing ideas and learning with other students Example: Work in small groups to read a text and complete a table
ROLE PLAYING	Pretending to be somebody else and using the language for the situation you are in Example: You are a reporter. Use the information from the reading to interview the writer
LINGUISTIC CONVERSATIONAL PATTERNS	Using expressions to start conversations and keep them going Example: Match formulaic expressions to situations
PRACTISING	Doing controlled exercises to improve knowledge and skills Example: Listen to a conversation, and practice it with a partner
USING CONTEXT	Using the surrounding context to guess the meaning of an unknown word, phrase, or concept
SUMMARIZING	Picking out and presenting the major points in a text in summary form
SELECTIVE LISTENING	Listening for key information without trying to understand every word Example: Listen to a conversation and identify the number of speakers
SKIMMING	Reading quickly to get a general idea of a text Example: Decide if a text is a newspaper article, a letter or an advertisement



AFFECTIVE PERSONALIZING	Learners share their own opinions, feelings and ideas about a subject. Example: Read a letter from a friend in need and give advice
SELF-EVALUATING	Thinking about how well you did on a learning task, and rating yourself on a scale
REFLECTING	Thinking about ways you learn best
CREATIVE BRAINSTORMING	Thinking of as many new words and ideas as one can Example: Work in a group and think of as many occupations as you can

(Nunan 1999)

Reflect

Review a textbook with which you are familiar and identify as many of the above strategies as you can.

The typologies introduced so far focus mainly on tasks for developing oral language skills. An early strategies-based typology for developing reading skills was proposed by Grellet (1981), who identified three main types of strategy:

- sensitizing
- improving reading speed
- from skimming to scanning.

Sensitizing is sub-categorized into:

- making inferences
- understanding relations within the sentence
- linking sentences and ideas.

From skimming to scanning includes:

- predicting
- previewing
- anticipating
- skimming
- scanning.

Grellet (1981: 12–13)

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Classroom tasks exploiting these strategies include:

- ordering a sequence of pictures
- comparing texts and pictures
- matching and using illustrations
- completing a document
- mapping it out
- jigsaw reading
- reorganizing the information
- comparing several texts
- completing a document
- summarizing
- note taking.

A more recent and far more comprehensive set of reading strategies is presented by Lai (1997). Lai argues that by matching strategies, texts and reading purposes it is possible for second language readers to significantly increase both their reading speed, and also their comprehension. The strategies in her typology, along with an explanatory gloss, is set out below.

Strategy	Comment
1. Having a purpose	It is important for students to have a clear purpose and to keep in mind what they want to gain from the text.
2. Previewing	Conducting a quick survey of the text to identify the topic, the main idea, and the organization of the text.
3. Skimming	Looking quickly through the text to get a general idea of what it is about.
4. Scanning	Looking quickly through a text in order to locate specific information.
5. Clustering	Reading clusters of words as a unit.
6. Avoiding bad habits	Avoiding habits such as reading word by word.
7. Predicting	Anticipating what is to come.
8. Reading actively	Asking questions and then reading for answers.



9. Inferring	Identifying ideas that are not explicitly stated.
10. Identifying genres	Identifying the overall organizational pattern of a text.
11. Identifying paragraph	Identifying the organizational structure of a paragraph, for example, whether it follows an inductive or deductive pattern.
12. Identifying sentence structure	Identifying the subject and main verb in complex sentences.
13. Noticing cohesive devices	Assigning correct referents to proforms, ² and identifying the function of conjunctions.
14. Inferring unknown vocabulary	Using context as well as parts of words (e.g. prefixes, suffixes and stems) to work out the meaning of unknown words.
15. Identifying figurative language	Understanding the use of figurative language and metaphors.
16. Using background knowledge	Using what one already knows to understand new ideas.
17. Identifying style and its purpose	Understanding the writer's purpose in using different stylistic devices such as a series of short or long sentences.
18. Evaluating	Reading critically, and assessing the truth value of textual information.
19. Integrating information	Tracking ideas that are developed across the text through techniques such as highlighting and note-taking.
20. Reviewing	Looking back over a text and summarizing it.
21. Reading to present	Understanding the text fully and then presenting it to others.

(Adapted from Lai 1997)

2 Proforms are the second item of an anaphoric reference tie. They can be pronouns: 'John left the room. He was sick of the party.', or demonstratives: 'John left the room. This is because he was sick of the party.'

Reflect

Review a textbook or set of materials for teaching reading, and identify as many of the strategies set out above as you can.

Teacher and learner roles

‘Role’ refers to the part that learners and teachers are expected to play in carrying out learning tasks as well as the social and interpersonal relationships between the participants. In this section, I will look first at learner roles and then at teacher roles.

In their comprehensive analysis of approaches and methods in language teaching, Richards and Rodgers (1986) devote considerable attention to learner and teacher roles. They point out that a method (and, in our case, a task) will reflect assumptions about the contributions that learners can make to the learning process. The following table is based on the analysis carried out by Richards and Rodgers. (Appendix A gives further details.)

Approach	Roles
Oral Situational	learner listens to teacher and repeats; no control over content or methods
Audiolingual	learner has little control; reacts to teacher direction; passive, reactive role
Communicative	learner has an active, negotiative role; should contribute as well as receive
Total Physical Response	learner is a listener and performer; little influence over content and none over methodology
The Silent Way	learners learn through systematic analysis; must become independent and autonomous
Community Language Learning	learners are members of a social group or community; move from dependence to autonomy as learning progresses
The Natural Approach	learners play an active role and have a relatively high degree of control over content language production
Suggestopedia	learners are passive, have little control over content or methods

It is not necessary to have a detailed knowledge of these various methods to see the rich array of learner roles that they entail. These include:

- the learner is a passive recipient of outside stimuli
- the learner is an interactor and negotiator who is capable of giving as well as taking
- the learner is a listener and performer who has little control over the content of learning
- the learner is involved in a process of personal growth
- the learner is involved in a social activity, and the social and interpersonal roles of the learner cannot be divorced from psychological learning processes
- the learner must take responsibility for his or her own learning, developing autonomy and skills in learning-how-to-learn.

This last point raises the important issue of learners developing an awareness of themselves as learners, which was also raised in Chapter 2. There is growing evidence that an ability to identify one's preferred learning style, and reflect on one's own learning strategies and processes, makes one a better learner (see, for example, Oxford 1990; Reid 1995). Becoming sensitive to a range of learning processes is important in situations where task-based learning replaces more traditional forms of instruction. If learners do not appreciate the rationale behind what to them may appear a radical new way of learning, they may reject the approach.

There is some evidence to suggest that 'good' language learners share certain characteristics. The following list, adapted from Rubin and Thomson (1982), shows that the 'good' language learner is critical, reflective and autonomous. (See also Benson 2002; Nunan and Pill 2002.)



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Good language learners . . .	Implications for teachers
. . . find their own way	Help learners to discover ways of learning that work best for them, for example how they best learn vocabulary items.
. . . organize information about language	Develop ways for learners to organize what they have learned, through making notes and charts, grouping items and displaying them for easy reference.
. . . are creative	Encourage learners to experiment with different ways of creating and using language, for example with new ways of using words, playing with different arrangements of sounds and structures, inventing imaginative texts and playing language games.
. . . make their own opportunities	Facilitate active learning by getting students to interact with fellow learners and with you, asking questions, listening regularly to the language, reading different kinds of texts and practising writing.
. . . learn to live with uncertainty	Require learners to work things out for themselves using resources such as dictionaries.
. . . use mnemonics	Help learners find quick ways of recalling what they have learned, for example through rhymes, word associations, word classes, particular contexts of occurrence, experiences and personal memories.
. . . make errors work	Teach learners to live with errors and help them learn from their errors.
. . . use their linguistic knowledge	Where appropriate, help learners make comparisons with what they know about language from their mother tongue as well as building on what they have already learned in the new language.



. . . let the context help them	Help learners realize the relationships that exist between words, sounds and structures, developing their capacity to guess and infer meaning from the surrounding context and from their background knowledge.
. . . learn to make intelligent guesses	Develop learners' capacity to work out meanings and to guess on the basis of probabilities of occurrence.
. . . learn formalized routines	Encourage learners to memorize routines, whole phrases and idioms.
. . . learn production techniques	Help learners not to be so concerned with accuracy that they do not develop the capacity to be fluent.
. . . use different styles of speech and writing	Develop learners' ability to differentiate between styles of speech and writing, both productively and receptively.

Reflect

To what extent do the materials and tasks you use encourage or allow learners to explore and apply strategies such as these?

Learners who apply the kinds of strategies set out in the box above have adopted an active approach towards their learning. They see themselves as being in control of their own learning rather than as passive recipients of content provided by the teacher or the textbook. Many will find ways of activating their learning out of class. (See Nunan and Pill 2002 for an inventory of ways in which language can be activated out of class.)

Teacher roles and learner roles are two sides of a coin. Giving the learners a more active role in the classroom requires the teacher to adopt a different role.

Problems are likely to arise if there is a mismatch between the role perceptions of learners and teachers. According to Breen and Candlin (1980) the teacher has three main roles in the communicative classroom. The first is to act as a facilitator of the communicative process, the second is to act as a participant, and the third is to act as an observer and learner. If the learners see the teacher as someone who should be providing explicit instruction and modelling of the target language, and the teacher sees him or herself as a facilitator and guide, then conflict may arise. In

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such a situation the teacher may need to strike a balance between the roles that she feels appropriate and those demanded by the students.

Reflect

What role for the teacher is implicit in the following statement? Is this attitude a reasonable one, or somewhat extreme?

The teacher as teacher is necessary only when the class is attempting to resolve a language problem, for it is only in this situation that the teacher is automatically assumed to possess more knowledge than the students. This role can be minimized if the students' attack strategies and reading skills have been effectively developed. If the task is realistic and the students have learned to adjust their reading strategies according to the task, there should be little need for teacher intervention.

(Clarke and Silberstein 1977: 52).

The best way of exploring the interplay between roles and tasks is to go to where the action is: the classroom itself. The two extracts that follow were taken from tasks designed to facilitate oral interaction. However, the roles of both teacher and learners are quite different.

Extract 1

T: Stephen's Place, OK. So Myer's is on the corner. Here's the corner, OK. One corner is here and one corner is here. Two corners, OK. Can you all see the corners? Understand the corner? Can you all see the corners? This is a corner, and this is a corner here. OK? One, two. And here is the corner of the table.

S: And here?

T: Corner, yes.

S: Corner, yeah?

T: OK, Maria, where is the corner of your desk?

S: Desk?

T: Your desk.

S: This one, this one.

T: Corner? Your desk, yes, one corner.

S: Here.

T: Four corners.

S: Oh, four.

T: Yeah, four corners. Right, one . . .

S: One, two (two), three (three), four.

T: Four, four corners, yeah, on the desk. Good. OK. And where's one corner of the room? Point to one corner. Yeah, that's one corner. Yes. Another one – two, yeah. Hung, three? Francey, four. Down on the ground. Yeah, four corners.

Extract 2

S: China, my mother is a teacher and my father is a teacher. Oh, she go finish, by bicycle, er, go to . . .

S: House?

S: No house, go to . . .

S: School?

S: My mother . . .

T: Mmm

S: . . . go to her mother.

T: Oh, your grandmother.

S: My grandmother. Oh, yes, by bicycle, by bicycle, oh, is, em, accident [gestures].

T: In water?

S: In water, yeah.

T: In a river!

S: River, yeah, river. Oh, yes, um, dead.

Ss: Dead! Dead! Oh!

In extract 1, the teacher plays the role of ringmaster. He asks the questions (most of these are display questions which require the learners to provide answers which the teacher already knows. The only student-initiated interaction is on a point of vocabulary.

In the second extract, the learners have a more proactive role. The teacher here acts as a 'scaffolder' providing a supporting framework for the learner who is struggling to express herself. The extract is a nice example of what McCarthy and Walsh (2003) call the 'classroom context' mode of interaction.

In classroom context mode, opportunities for genuine, real-world-type discourse are frequent and the teacher plays a less prominent role, taking a back seat and allowing learners all the space they need. The principal role of the teacher is to listen and support the interaction, which often takes on the appearance of a casual conversation outside the classroom. (McCarthy and Walsh 2003) The danger here is that unpredictable, uncomfortable, and controversial content might arise (such as 'death' in the extract above), which could disrupt or even derail the lesson. This is one possible reason why many teachers avoid this mode of interaction, and retain a high degree of control.

Recording and reflecting on one's teaching can be illuminating

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(and sometimes depressing!). Here are some comments from a group of teachers who had recorded, transcribed and analyzed a recently taught task-based language lesson. The teachers were asked to reflect on what they had learned about their teaching as a result of recording and transcribing the lesson. Interestingly, all of the comments reveal attitudes towards teacher/learner roles.

- As teachers we share an anxiety about ‘dominating’ and so a common assumption that we are too intrusive, directive, etc.
- I need to develop skills for responding to the unexpected and to exploit this to realize the full potential of the lesson.
- There are umpteen aspects which need improving. There is also the effort of trying to respond to contradictory notions about teaching (e.g. intervention versus non-intervention).
- I had been making a conscious effort to be non-directive, but was far more directive than I had thought.
- Using small groups and changing groups can be perplexing and counter-productive, or helpful and stimulating. There is a need to plan carefully to make sure such changes are positive.
- I have come to a better realization of how much listening the teacher needs to do.
- The teacher’s role in facilitating interaction is extremely important for all types of classes. How do you teach teachers this?
- I need to be more aware of the assumptions underlying my practice.
- I discovered I was over-directive and dominant.
- Not to worry about periods of silence in the classroom.
- I have a dreadful tendency to overload.
- I praise students, but it is rather automatic. There is also a lot of teacher talk in my lessons.
- I give too many instructions.
- I discovered that, while my own style is valuable, it leads me to view issues in a ‘blinker’ way. I need to analyze my own and others’ styles and ask why I do it that way.

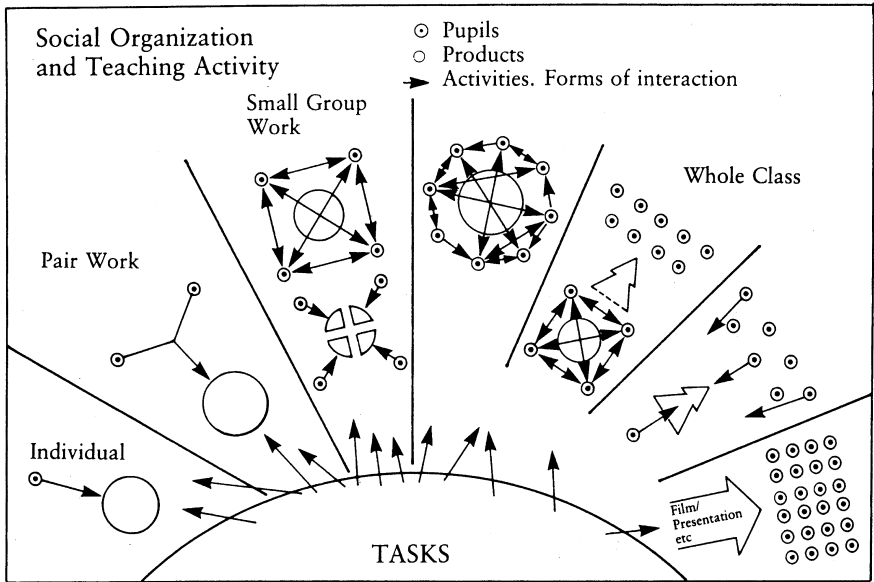
Reflect

In what ways are some of the issues dealt with earlier in the chapter reflected in these comments?

Settings

‘Settings’ refers to the classroom arrangements specified or implied in the task. It also requires consideration of whether the task is to be carried

out wholly or partly outside the classroom. A wide range of configurations is possible in the communicative classroom, although practical considerations such as class size can constrain what is possible in practice. The following diagram from Wright (1987: 58) captures the different ways in which learners might be grouped physically within the classroom.



(Wright 1987: 58)

Anderson and Lynch (1988) cite second language acquisition research (which we will look at in the next chapter) to argue for an emphasis on group work in language learning.

We might wish to use group-based work for general pedagogic reasons, such as a belief in the importance of increasing the cooperation and cohesiveness among students. Then there are more specifically language oriented arguments: classroom researchers such as Pica and Doughty (1985) have offered evidence for the positive role of group work in promoting a linguistic environment likely to assist L2 learning.

(Anderson and Lynch 1988: 59)

In considering settings for task-based learning, it is useful to distinguish between 'mode' and 'environment'. Learning 'mode' refers to whether the learner is operating on an individual or a group basis. If operating on an individual basis, is the learner self-paced but teacher-directed, or

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entirely self-directed? If the learner is operating as part of a group, is the task mainly for whole class, small group or pair work? Each of these configurations has implications for task design.

‘Environment’ refers to where the learning actually takes place. It might be a conventional classroom in a school or language centre, a community class, a workplace setting, a self-access centre, or a multi-media language centre. Until comparatively recently, it was assumed that learning would take place inside a conventional classroom. However, the advent of technology, and particularly the ‘anywhere/anytime’ learning possibilities offered by Web-based instruction, is forcing a reconceptualization of what we mean by the concept ‘classroom’.

These changes challenge our self-concept as foreign language teachers, because much more than in the past, we are now called upon to redefine our roles as educators, since we need to mediate between the world of the classroom and the world of natural language acquisition.

(Legutke 2000: 1)

There is increasing interest in the world outside the classroom as an environment for learning. Again, technology, including satellite and cable television and the Internet, and increasingly mobile workforces are facilitating this development in foreign language learning settings where instruction has traditionally been confined to the classroom. Tasks that use the community as a resource have three particular benefits:

1. they provide learners with opportunities for genuine interactions which have a real-life point to them
2. learners can adopt communicative roles which bypass the teacher as intermediary
3. they can change the in-class role relationships between teacher and pupils.

(Stevens 1987: 171)

While it is conventional wisdom that learners need to apply their language skills outside the classroom in order to progress, surprisingly little attention has been paid to learners’ views on the opportunities they have for practising / learning a language outside of the classroom. In order to address this gap, Nunan and Pill (2002) investigated opportunities afforded to a group of adult learners in Hong Kong to activate their language out of class. They also investigated which opportunities were principally to obtain further practice, and which were used for authentic interaction as part of their daily lives. The study found that learners have a wide range of exposure to out-of-class English (65 different types of

practice opportunities were documented), but that they find it difficult to distinguish between activities which are simply part of their lives and those that provide specific language practice.

Reflect

Consider your own approach to classroom tasks. Which student configurations do you favour? Why do you favour some ways of organizing learning over others? What opportunities are there, if any, for using the wider community as a resource for learning?

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have looked at the core task elements of goals, input and procedures, along with the supporting elements of teacher / learner roles and settings. I dealt with important constructs within TBLT, including the relationship between real-world and pedagogic tasks, text and task authenticity, and the place of learning strategies within the task-based classroom. In the next chapter, I will look at the research basis for task-based language teaching.

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