

Tasks and task-types

KEY IDEAS

- Task-based language teaching shifted the focus of language learning from knowledge of language to a focus on its use to achieve communicative purposes
- The value of tasks in language learning resides in their focus on purposeful use of language in diverse contexts
- Task-types provide a means for ensuring that students experience a comprehensive range of learning experiences
- The difficulty with using tasks as the basis for curriculum design resides in the issue of sequencing

One of the major developments in language teaching and learning in the 1980s, in concert with communicative language teaching, was the emergence of task-based language teaching and learning. This was an important movement that highlighted that students not only need to have knowledge of a language but also need to develop the ability to actually use it to achieve communicative purposes. Thus, students' learning was no longer to be described only in terms of inventories of language items, but also, and most importantly, in terms of tasks that they would accomplish – that is, what students do.

The nature of tasks

There has been an extensive debate on what constitutes a 'task' for the purposes of languages teaching and learning. Some distinctions have been drawn, for example, between 'exercises' (focused on noticing and developing aspects of the form of language) and 'tasks' (focused on integrated use of language) or between 'pedagogic' tasks (tasks accomplished for the purposes of classroom learning) and 'real-life' tasks (tasks involving the use of language in the real-world). More recently, emphasis in general education has been placed on developing 'higher order thinking tasks' or 'rich tasks'. Teachers developing these rich tasks build deep, elaborated thinking into the tasks

they ask students to do. As languages educators, we consider not only the need to develop accuracy (through a focus on form) and fluency (through active use of the target language in tasks) but also, and importantly, the need to develop complexity (Skehan, 1998) in interpreting and using language and in reflecting upon language and culture in the context of use. Thus, in developing tasks we also need to consider how each task builds on or extends previous learning and how it contributes to continuous and cumulative learning. Some of these distinctions are worth considering in developing the range of learning experiences that comprise a teaching and learning program for our students.

Tasks might be described as purposeful and contextualised instances of language use. They include:

A purpose	an underlying reason for undertaking the task (beyond the mere display of subject knowledge)
A context	the thematic, situational, and interactive circumstances in which the task is undertaken. The context may be real, simulated or imaginary. Considering context includes knowing where the task is taking place, when, who are involved, what previous experiences they share and what relationships they have
A process	a mode or process of inquiry, thinking, problem-solving, performing, creating
A product	the result of completing a task

(Clark, Scarino & Brownell, 1994)

Good language learning tasks, then, involve the judicious use of existing knowledge and above all an intellectual challenge (in both content and processes) for students; they involve interaction; they appeal to students' imagination and expand their interests; they develop confidence and provide a sense of achievement and enjoyment; and they contribute to learners' ever-developing communicative and learning repertoires.

Task-types

The value of tasks resides in the fact that they represent a worthwhile, integrative, purposeful, contextualised piece of work. Building on this value, tasks may be grouped in different ways to ensure a comprehensive range and variety of experiences for learners. These groupings are called task-types. The most frequently used way of categorising tasks is according to the four macro-skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Another way was developed in the six activity-types of the *Australian Language Levels Guidelines* (Scarino et al, 1988). These include:

- interacting and discussing
- interacting and deciding/transacting
- obtaining information and using it
- giving information
- personal response
- personal expression.

Another system of task-types focuses on higher order thinking skills:

- enquiring, interpreting
- presenting
- problem-solving
- performing
- creating, designing, composing
- judging, evaluating, responding (see Clark, Scarino & Brownell, 1994).

The task-type categories provide a means for ensuring that students engage with a range of learning experiences, participate in a range of language use in different contexts and, through this, learn increasingly to manage the variability of context. A dimension that is not sufficiently captured in these systems of task-type categorisations is a focus on reflection. This focus requires further elaboration.

Difficulties in using tasks

Tasks can be seen as a 'one-off' experience. There is a danger, then, that the task, no matter how engaging, becomes an end in itself, rather than a meaningful experience that leads to further *learning* in a conceptually, well-sequenced program. From an assessment point of view, teachers may be tempted to 'teach to the task', which again is not necessarily conducive to developing language learning over time. Another difficulty is sequencing. While principles can be offered to provide a basis for sequencing tasks (eg extendedness, complexity, application) the way in which these are used is not obvious.

Questions for reflection

- 1 In your languages teaching, do you draw a distinction between exercises and tasks or pedagogic tasks and real-life tasks? Why? Why not?
- 2 How do you ensure that your students experience a range of tasks through your program and interactions with you?
- 3 How might you modify one of the tasks you currently use to make it more complex and worthwhile for your students from a language-and-culture learning point of view?