GLOJAJ DIDACTICAJ
REVISTA ELECTRÓNICA INTERNACIONAL
ISSN 1576-7809

ARTÍCULOS

TBL and young learners

Manuel Megías Rosa
Universidad de Alcalá

Introduction

For acquisition to take place learners must be focused on meaning rather than on grammatical form. It becomes the teacher's job to talk with the class at a level somewhat above their existing comprehension threshold (what Stephen Krashen terms "input +1") and to accompany this with non-verbal aspects of communication such as mime, gestures, visuals, actions, intonation. If learners are focussed on meaning, then their inborn acquisition capacity will take care of the system of rules that underlies the meanings on which they are focussed.
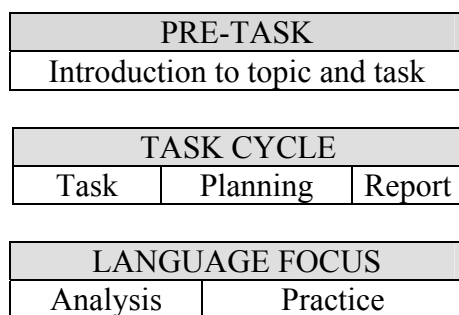
Although Krashen's theories have come under attack and most researchers and teachers now recognize the interface between acquisition and learning, it cannot be denied that learning a second language is nearly automatic when learners are exposed to comprehensible input and participate in real communication (the way people acquire their mother tongue). We also have to admit that comprehensible input together with real communication may be sufficient for learning a language different from the mother tongue when there is high exposure to the target language outside the language classroom. This is the reason why, although FL and L2 have been simplified with the term L2, a clear distinction between foreign language (FL) or modern language (ML) and second language (L2) must be made: it is evident that learning a language where there is no exposure to the target language outside the classroom and learning a language in a natural setting (the country where the target language is spoken) do not share the same conditions, kinds of learners or motivation.

It is in the natural setting where the word "task" entered language teaching through work with adults who needed to (or had to) use the second language outside the classroom (Allwright 1979, Breen 1984, Nunan 1989, 1993). Tasks were adopted as teaching units to try to bring the classroom and real life closer together. Nevertheless, is task-based learning (TBL) suitable for either setting or all ages? This is a question we will try to answer in relation to young learners of English as a foreign language (or modern language as we will

call it from now on), considering that some experts in the field of second language learning have criticised its applicability to lower learning levels.

The role of language input

All theories of second language acquisition agree that, for learning a modern language, learners must be exposed to a considerable amount of language input either in natural or artificial teaching settings. Let's see how TBL deals with this principle. The components of task-based learning can be summarised in the following diagram, which illustrates the different basic stages of task-based methodology according to Willis (1996: 52): the pre-task, the task cycle and language focus:

PRE-TASK
Introduction to topic and task

TASK CYCLE		
Task	Planning	Report

LANGUAGE FOCUS	
Analysis	Practice

Harmer (2002:87) summarises very clearly the stages of the TBL framework: "in the pre-task the teacher discusses the topic with the class and may highlight useful words and phrases, helping the students to understand the task instructions. The students may hear a recording of people doing the same task. During the task cycle, the students perform the task in pairs or small groups while the teacher monitors from a distance. The students then plan what they will tell the rest of the class, what they did and how it went, and they then report on the task either orally or in writing. In the language focus stage the students examine and discuss specific features of any listening or reading text which they have looked up for the task and the teacher may conduct some form of practice of specific language features which the task has provoked."

According to the task cycle presented above, listening materials (recordings) should be used in the pre-task (where pupils listen to native speakers performing the same task) and language focus section (where pupils read the transcript of the dialogues used in the pre-task and take note of relevant vocabulary and grammatical structures). However, lack of suitable materials is one of the main problems non-native teachers encounter when trying to implement a particular task. Finding these materials is a burden which Estaire and Zanon load on the teacher's shoulders without considering that it is one of the most complicated labours of the learning/teaching process: "*Note to teachers: find a recording in which a person gives personal information (...). Adjust the grid to the text. Set the context if there is evidence in the recording*" (1994:60).

Similarly, we do not think Jane Willis considers this extra/amount of work and difficulty when she states that "*one practical solution is to make your own recordings, with*

transcripts, or fluent target language speakers doing the same tasks as the students" (88) and continues by enumerating the advantages that a solution like this would mean for language learners before concluding: *"many resource books have great ideas for tasks, but not recordings. So you might like to try making your own. The question is, how easy is it*?", a question that up to now has an easy answer: most primary as well as secondary language teachers do not have at their disposal either native speakers or colleagues with solid linguistic competence in the target language (accuracy and/or fluency) who could help them solve the problem. Willis herself admits that: *"overcoming the difficulties of coping with natural input at the beginning is largely a matter of task design"*.

Some questions arise at this point, when using or adapting materials that do not fulfil these requirements. As a matter of fact, as we said before, not all teachers find it easy to prepare listening materials or have the adequate linguistic competence to produce suitable models. When teachers use already existing listening texts that provide vocabulary and structures not conceived for the specific task, aren't pupils forced to use a language they do not understand? Shouldn't students first be able to understand the language they are going to produce during the task cycle? Doesn't this reality go against basic methodological and motivational principles?

TBL and language output: 2 case studies

When facing the teaching of a modern language we can see that children's competence in their mother tongue is quite sufficient for them to share meaning with their peers. Furthermore, it is difficult for them to understand why they have to express themselves in a language which is not theirs in a setting (the classroom) where everyone is able to speak the same language without any difficulty (monolingual group). Most English teachers who do not use TBL find group work difficult to manage from this point of view, as their pupils tend to slip easily into using their mother tongue during a game or an activity whose language content has been fully rehearsed in advance.

Concerning TBL, a couple of case studies can be used to illustrate what has been said before. A first example of a task was carried out by a group of 10-11 year olds for a total of five hours and consisted in writing a recipe. The teacher reported the following: "e*ven if encouraged to use the [ML] language they know, all of them carried out the task in Spanish. At this stage a stronger teacher's role would have been negative, stopping the discussion and even reducing motivation. In any case, the teacher addressed the students in English, speaking in Spanish when she realized that the students were not understanding properly."* This teacher concluded by stating that the amount of language learnt was quite small and the pupils were aware of the fact that it was important to have practised the new items before. The role of the teacher was concentrated more on the process than on the product in language learning terms and it would have been more useful to have more controlled activities aimed at introducing them to recipe language, such as pre-practising some instruction formulae and some food items.

The second example of a task was carried out by a group of 10-11 year olds in a different primary school. The experience extended for six hours. The idea was to translate

into very simple English a short version of the tale "The Wizard of Oz". Throughout the whole process, the discussion among pupils was always carried out in Spanish, even though the teacher tried to encourage them to speak English. After the discussion, the pupils agreed on making a big book with big pictures and sentences. The teacher helped them to consider the limits of their English knowledge and to work out a solution as to, for example, what they could do when they weren't able to translate their Spanish into English. First of all, they wanted to form the groups and, after having written the story in Spanish, they asked the teacher to help them in the translation into English. When they were ready to do so, the teacher asked them what they needed for their work. They mainly asked for a dictionary and their English textbook. During the exercise they were very insecure and wanted the teacher's feedback constantly. At that point, the teacher decided not to help them and she invited them to write in English using words and structures which they already knew. For the new words they had to use the dictionary. When they finished, the teacher checked the correctness of their sentences underlining their mistakes in terms of both words and linguistic structures. As for the outcome, the teacher pointed out that the pupils' parameter was mainly motivational, since they wanted their school friends to be interested in the tale and it was a bit hard to make them feel the linguistic importance of their work.

Both teachers thought that the children would use their previous knowledge, either when writing the recipe or translating the story. However, what really happened was that the children bombed them with dozens of vocabulary/grammar related questions, to produce the sentences they had to write. Some grammatical structures, sometimes of an enormous complexity, not adequate to their cognitive level, had to be translated into English so that the recipe or the story could be elaborated. There was very little room for acquisition due to the complexity of the language required.

Task-based framework

As said in the introduction, the tasks were adopted to try to bring the classroom and real life closer together. In this sense TBL has proven to be effective for second language learners (those who acquire a second language in a natural setting) and for first language learners (those pupils who acquire Catalan in a school in Catalonia, for example) at any level. On the other hand, the effectiveness of TBL as a regular methodology for teaching/learning a language like English at secondary schools and above, in an unnatural setting, has been criticised by Seedhouse (1999), for whom "the kind of interaction which typical tasks promote leads to the use of specific "task-solving linguistic forms which fail to include the kind of language we might expect from discussion, debate, or social interactions of other kinds. There is also the problem with how to grade tasks in a syllabus" (Harmer 2001: 87).

Concerning early modern language learning, it is surprising that Jane Willis devoted only three pages of her work *A Framework for task based learning* (1997) to young learners and that most of her suggestions deal with the concept of traditional activities without defining them or proposing how these activities could be implemented in the classroom. She only provides three types of tasks under the headings "Listen and do

activities", which "does not necessarily involve the learners in any language production" (127); "classifying", which offers "exposure and minimal language use" (128); and "puzzles", which "require more language production" (129). The ideas given in the "language focus for young children section" are simply "matching words to pictures, sentence building and products of display".

How can the concept "task" for young learners be applied according to these suggestions if they resemble tremendously the activities proposed by authors such as Rixon, Brewster, Halliwell and many other experts in the field of teaching foreign languages to young learners who have never used the word "task"? Does it mean that what has traditionally been considered "activities" can also be named as "tasks"?

More recent research in the area of teaching foreign languages at an early age (Lingua Proyect A 56330-CP-ES-LA) also includes three pages under the heading "Task based approach: a possible starting point" and attempts to describe the difference between traditional methodologies and task based teaching. For the former, linguistic content and teaching programmes are organised following structural and functional criteria. For the latter, the teaching programme is conceived as an organisational system of either of these types of content and activities. Classroom activities are planned but the teaching unit development will depend on the learners' reactions to the planned activities and needs emerging along the teaching-learning process. The programme and activities are adjusted as the teaching unit develops. More than a predetermined unit it is a schematic guide. The final planning will only be defined once the teaching unit is over. As a result, different programmes for the same teaching unit are likely to emerge from different groups and schooling contexts.

Nevertheless, it is surprising to see that in order to illustrate the use of tasks an example of didactic units is offered under the following headings:

- Activities
- Materials
- Cross curricular dimensions
- Functions
- Structures
- Vocabulary
- Objectives

In the section "activities" a total of 22 activities can be found (listen and colour, listen and stick, singing, drawing, etc.). These start with a presentation of some items in a quite traditional way and finish with evaluation by means of a final task in which the children have to answer a number of questions and perform a series of actions indicated by the teacher. The only difference between the TBL approach suggested and a more traditional methodology is the fact of placing the objectives at the end, though the sequence of activities has been carefully planned according to the objectives decided by

the teacher without clarifying the children's participation in decision making, a typical feature of this kind of approach.

When attempting to define the word "task" related to young learners, L. Cameron (2001: 29-31) says "I am not interested in an abstract concept of task but in a unit of activity that can be used for lesson planning and evaluation". She follows by stating that language for young learners raises more problems with the notion of "real" or "authentic" language use than for older learners. Many children do not use the foreign language outside the classroom: "eight or nine year olds have little need to book holiday accommodation or give directions. The best we can do is aim for dynamic congruence: choosing activities and content that are appropriate for the children's age and socio-cultural background. She says that "tasks can be defined as language activities but that not all activities can be named as tasks". Rather than taking outcomes as criteria as in Willis' form of TBL, the focus is on how the goals and action create a *unified whole* (Coughlan and Duff 1994). For the child, a classroom task should have a clear purpose and meaning; for the teacher, the task should have clear language learning goals. Cameron summarises the features of classroom tasks as having:

- Coherence and unity for learners (from topic, activity and /or outcome)
- Meaning and purpose for learners
- Clear language goals
- A beginning and end
- Active involvement on the part of learners

Cameron proposes that any task, for example, saying something about the daily life of a character, must be divided in three stages: preparation, core activity and follow up, which more or less correspond with the pre-, while and post- stages which have been used for many years with the different language skills. Every stage has clear language learning goals and different steps divided in one or various activities that have to be planned carefully.

Conclusion

In our opinion, task-based work, as presented by Willis and other experts, can be a useful tool for language learning in L1 and L2 settings. Nevertheless, concerning ML settings and young learners, we consider TBL more suitable for supporting learning or for revising vocabulary and structures acquired, no matter what type of approach the language teacher has used. In this way we agree totally with the definition of task provided by Crookes & Chaudron 2001:33: *task will apply to a separate element of a lesson that is primarily geared to practising language presented earlier (or otherwise learnt), usually involving students working with each other, to achieve a specific objective.*

Through the case studies we have seen that, on the one hand, the methodological principle "comprehension should always precede production", especially in the early stages of ML/L2 learning/acquisition, have not been followed as in both experiences the

tasks were mostly performed in the children's mother tongue. On the other hand, translation, a useful didactic tool, even if some experts think it has to be avoided, was used and perhaps overused without producing meaningful results in language learning terms. As many teachers of English have pointed out, translation is a kind of compulsory step when using TBL, especially in the reporting phase. Shouldn't that reality be accepted and translation considered a basic component of TBL in artificial settings? Recognition of this situation would facilitate task planning and free many practitioners from the existing translation taboo. It must be admitted that many non-native teachers and learners, even those who do not use TBL, make regular use of translation in their everyday teaching/learning practice.

Susan Halliwell (1990), who never uses the word task, is quite clear in her book "Teaching English in the Primary Classroom", a manual which has inspired thousands of primary English teachers for more than a decade all over the world. In her book, she presents many different learning activities to cover a specific topic. For her, knowledge is cumulative; first we can start with numbers, then with colours, then combinations of numbers and colours, then with animals, then combinations of animals, numbers and colours, and so on. The word "real", which characterises tasks, has different meanings for young learners. An activity disguised as a game is reality for a child; fantasising and imagining are also real things for them. In other words, with young learners the meaning "to bring the classroom and real life closer together" has a special connotation as activities themselves can be motivating and very close to the child's world.

Moreover, Cameron's ideas seem quite reasonable when attempting to define tasks for 10-11 year olds. What we, as teachers, must never forget is that we want our pupils to learn a foreign language (English as a *lingua franca* mostly), and to achieve that goal every meaningful and motivating instrument which could lead to language acquisition should be tried out.

Bibliography

Allwright, R. (1979). Language Learning Through Communication Practice in Broomfit C. & K. Jonhson (eds). *The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching*.Oxford University Press.

Breen, M. (1984) Authenticity in the Language Classroom. *Applied Linguistics*.6, 1:60-70.

Brewster, J et alt. (1992). *The Primary Teacher's Guide*. Penguin.

Cameron, L. (2001). *Teaching Languages to Young Learners*. Cambridge University Press.

Coughlan, P. & P. Duff (1994). Same Task, Different Activities: Analysis of a SLA Task form an Activity Theory Perspective in J. Lantolf & G. Appel (eds) *Vygotskyan Approaches to Second Language Research*. Ablex 173-194.

CPR de Oviedo (ed). (2002). *Formación del Profesorado y Enseñanza de Lenguas Exranjeras en Edades Tempranas*. Gráficas Papiro S.L.

Crookes G. & C. Chaudron (2001). "Guidelines for Language Classroom Instruction" in M. Celce- Murcia (ed.), *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language.* Heinle & Heinle Thomson Learning.

Estaire y Zanón, (1994). *Planning Classwork. A Task-Based Approach.* Heinemann.

Halliwell, S. (1992). *Teaching English in the Primary Classroom.*Longman

Harmer, J. (2003). *The Practice of English Language Teaching.* Longman.

Nunan, D. (1989). *Designing Tasks for the Communicative Classroom.*Cambridge University Press.

Nunan, D. (1993). Task-Based Syllabus Design: Selecting, Grading and Sequencing Task in Gass, S. & G. Crookes (eds), *Task in a Pedagogical Context*, Multilingual Matters.

Rixon, S. (1999). *Young Learners of English: Some Research Perspectives.* Longman, British Council.

Willis, J. (1996). *A Framework for Task Based Learning.* Longman