

Task Types

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ABSTRACT

This paper is part of a more complete study of a number of theoretical principles concerning the teaching of English grammar in EFL contexts. The purpose of this article is to analyse a number of classifications of task types. One of the striking aspects of task typologies is the rich variety of approaches to task classification that syllabus designers now offer. The available surveys of task types usually provide the reader with lists of activities; however, they do not give teachers any guidance in grading or sequencing different tasks or in organizing and integrating criteria for task design. But we need to deal with “task types, not tasks, or there will be no generalizability” (Long 12), even though typologies are likely to be fuzzy edged and in most cases a mere convenience.

This paper is part of a more complete study of a number of theoretical principles concerning the teaching of English grammar in EFL contexts. In Spain, attitudes to language teaching have changed a good deal over the last ten years or so. Syllabus designers and teachers have become increasingly concerned with language in use, rather than with language as a formal system. One of the results has been the rejection of traditional approaches to L2 teaching. Learners are usually encouraged to communicate as far as they can in the classroom about topics of interest, the teacher only teaching new items when it is obvious that the learners need them. However, due to the learners' different expectations of a language teaching lesson, it can lead to lack of security and

purpose, which in turn can have a negative effect on motivation. One could suggest that narrowly 'communicative' approaches are unlikely to be any more effective than earlier perspectives.

The central question this poses is: what do we need to teach that will stimulate the learning of grammar? Is there any single best approach to effective grammar teaching? In previous papers (Cuesta "Task-Based Approach", "Task Design", "Teaching of Grammar"), I have tried to show the need for a mixed methodology. I have argued for some degree of eclecticism and balance between the poles of the continuum. I have also advocated an approach to language teaching which incorporates regulation task-based grammar activities along with more product-oriented activities. 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.

I would claim that where grammar is concerned, it is dangerous to look for general solutions. There are grammatical structures which need to be isolated and practised before the learner can easily manipulate them; others, on the contrary, can be learnt by including them directly in communicative exchanges. One really needs to be, I believe, 'communicative' at some points and 'structural' at others. In fact, there is nothing particularly new about an approach like this. Left to themselves, teachers have always followed an integrated methodology.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse a number of classifications of task types. One of the striking aspects of task typologies is the rich variety of approaches to task classification that syllabus designers now offer. The available surveys of task types (e.g. Rivers and Temperley, Littlewood, Ur, Harmer) usually provide the reader with lists of activities; however, they do not give teachers any guidance in grading or sequencing different tasks (as suggested in Cuesta "Task Design") or in organizing and integrating criteria for task design. But we need to deal with "task types, not tasks, or there will be no generalizability" (Long 12), even though typologies are likely to be fuzzy edged and in most cases a mere convenience.

Approaches to task organization include the following: "some highlighting target (real world) behaviour, some cognitive strategy, some communicative performance, some generalised processes, some social structures in the classroom" (Candlin 15). A myriad of examples of task types are often referred to in the L2 literature: one-way / two-way tasks; optional versus required exchange of information, information gap and decision-making tasks; problem-solving tasks, negotiation of meaning versus negotiation of output, and so on (see Duff).

Brown and Yule (109) offer the following taxonomy of task types with regard to listening and speaking skills:

1. Static relationships

- (a) Describing an object or photograph
- (b) Instructing someone to draw a diagram
- (c) Instructing someone how to assemble a piece of equipment
- (d) Describing / instructing how a number of objects are to be arranged

(e) Giving route directions

2. Dynamic relationships

(a) Story-telling

(b) Giving an eye-witness account

3. Abstract relationships

(a) Opinion-expressing

(b) Justifying a course of action.

Candlin (15-6) suggests the following task types:

Type 1. Focus on Learner Training

(a) Awareness-raising tasks

(b) Needs, Objectives and Resource tasks

Type 2. Focus on Information-sharing

Type 3. Focus on Research and Experimentation (e.g. tasks aimed at formulating hypotheses or at evaluating results)

Type 4. Focus on Learner Strategy (e.g. tasks focused on inferring, judging, classifying).

In contrast, Long discusses task types in relation to performance features. Arguably, task designers should also consider the inter-relationship between conceptual and performance criteria (for review, see Cuesta "Task Design"). Long (13) focuses on two psycholinguistic properties: the potential of a task type to encourage interlanguage negotiation work and to promote interlanguage complexity and destabilization. He illustrates his position with three pairs of pedagogic tasks:

1. One-way / two-way tasks

The former refers to an interaction which involves the giving of information from only one interlocutor to the other. The latter requires exchanges of information between participants in order to complete a given task. A task in which learners have to ask their teacher for information about a certain character in order to write a text afterwards is one-way. In contrast, in a two-way task each member, for example, listens to different tapes of an interview between a policeman and four suspects; individuals have information which the other members lack but need if the crime is to be solved.

Long argues that two-way tasks generate more negotiation work than one-way tasks. However, Gass and Varonis present results that do not show any significant difference between both types of tasks. The explanation they suggest concerns shared assumptions: there is greater shared knowledge in two-way tasks than in one-way tasks. It follows from

this that the greater the shared background knowledge, the less need for negotiation. Gass and Varonis finally claim that “the kind of information exchange is not the only determining factor of modified interaction. The kind of task interacts with the amount of shared background that the participants bring to the task” (159). This confirms the need to integrate performance and conceptual criteria.

2. Planned / unplanned tasks

Planned tasks stretch learners’ interlanguage and expose them to constant pressures for destabilization. In this way, Crookes’ study implies “the desirability of investigating the classroom use of some non-spontaneous, planned language as a means of promoting L2 development” (380). There is evidence that learners who are given preparation time operate at a higher level and produce more complex language. Consequently, as Long (15) argues, “learners will improve faster if they engage in language work nearer the upper bounds of what they are currently capable of than practice at levels below their current capacity.”

3. Closed / open tasks

Closed tasks are those in which learners know there is a definite outcome, i.e. a single correct answer. There are other tasks which can lead to more and more open-ended outcomes, i.e. there is no one correct answer or its equivalent. Such tasks are open. Learners have, then, more control over the latter type of activity and are much freer to reach their own conclusions. Consider the following task:

- *Look at the picture and listen to the recording. How many differences can you find?* Such an activity might be described as closed. The answer is usually predetermined by the task designer or the teacher. In contrast, the following would be an example of open task:
- *How important are these things to you? Very important? Quite important? Not very important? Which is the most important? Which is the least important? List them in order of importance, and compare lists with three other students.*

a car children TV money love freedom music friends books
(Swan and Walter 122).

Other open tasks include, for instance, free conversation and debates. Long claims that closed tasks produce more negotiation work, both quantitatively and qualitatively, since learners know “that task completion depends on their finding ‘the’ answer, not settling on any answer they choose” (18). Long goes on to assert that closed tasks “will elicit more topic and language recycling, more feedback, more incorporation, more rephrasing, more precision ... These adjustments ... are likely to lead to provision and incorporation of feedback, and hence, to interlanguage destabilization” (18).

Nevertheless, I would argue that the accounts so far do not pay enough attention to learner differences. If we want to predict the way different learners respond to various

tasks, we must consider the effects of cognitive style. Therefore, a distinction is usually drawn between convergers and divergers. The former 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:

(a) Convergent tasks

They require learners to agree on a solution, but it is their own (as opposed to closed tasks). Convergent tasks 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. Consequently, 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.

(b) 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 is the case of the following task:

- *Defend the view that TV has a terrible influence on individuals and society in general.*
- *Defend the view that TV is one of the greatest inventions of all time.*

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. Another characteristic is that learners tend to use more clause-chaining and clause-integrating when involved in divergent tasks.

In an interesting study, Duff focuses on two types of tasks: problem-solving tasks (PS) and debates (D). She defines PS as convergent or 'shared-goal tasks', and D as divergent or 'independent-goal tasks'. In PS, learners are asked to select from several alternatives, in order to agree on a solution to the problem. A fairly typical example includes survival exercises, such as the following one:

- You are at the North Pole. Your tractor and radio transmitter have broken down and you cannot repair them. You have to walk 100 miles (160 km) to the nearest camp. You have enough warm clothing and boots; you also have the following things on the tractor, but you can't carry them all. What will you take? Choose carefully -it's a matter of life and death.

<i>matches</i>	<i>ten blankets</i>
<i>saucepan</i>	<i>gas cooker</i>
<i>large water bottle</i>	<i>toothbrush</i>
<i>tent</i>	<i>20m of rope</i>
<i>tin-opener</i>	<i>compass</i>
<i>first aid kit</i>	<i>rifles</i>
<i>backpack</i>	<i>small radio</i>
<i>sunglasses</i>	<i>30kg of tinned food</i>
<i>gas cartridges</i>	<i>ten signal flares</i>

(Swan and Walter 121).

In D, learners are required to reason, explain and justify their own ideas, and perhaps refute the points raised by others with as many arguments as possible. Examples include discussions about the role of women in society or the generation gap.

Duff (1986) reports different kinds of language use:

-PS (i.e. convergent tasks) promotes a significantly greater number of total turns per task and individual subject turns, since more negotiation is required for an agreed solution. There is also more interaction in PS than in D. There are more collaboration checks, expressive and rhetorical questions and total questions asked in PS than in D.

-In contrast, D generates more words per turn than PS. The discourse in D is more syntactically complex, because it needs more complex verbal reasoning. It is also more extended than in PS in order to provide sufficient argument. There is more reformulation in D, which seems to stimulate self- or other-paraphrasing. D produces more comprehension checks (e.g. You know what I mean?) and clarification requests (e.g. What do you mean?).

With regard to the negotiation produced by D, Long considers free conversation a poor task, since participants tend to "treat topics briefly, to drop them altogether when serious trouble arises, to provide feedback to their interlocutors less often, to incorporate feedback from their interlocutors less often and to recycle linguistic material less often than when (they) ... work together on various other problem-solving tasks" (17). I would argue that this position runs contrary to the intuitions of many language teachers, who have experienced that negotiation does indeed take place between learners in D, through questioning, paraphrasing, commenting and constructing arguments in favour of their own view and against their partners.' For this reason, I would suggest that PS and D have complementary values and both have a role to play in the teaching of grammar.

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