CHAPTER II

TASK- BASED LEARNING

Recently, the concept of *"task"* has come into focus in various investigations, and like many other concepts in the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) field, it is being defined in a variety of ways. If this is the case, almost any activity, even a classroom lesson on a grammatical point, using a gap filling exercise as a structure elicitation device, has been mislabeled as a task, even though these activities involve no communication between learners. Clearly, the concept of task as teaching and research construction needs to be clarified.

One might question whether any classroom activity can be called a task. Swales (1990) said language learning activities can be divided into either mechanical exercise or communicative task. The first type, which are associated with the more traditional language teaching approaches (e.g. audio-lingual methodology, cognitive-code method) are being criticized because they produce language which is not used in the real world or authentic. Activities that fall under this category consist of drills that bear little resemblance to natural face-to-face exchanges. The second category includes the kinds of communicative activities which can be labeled as tasks. An example of this kind of communicative task is the information-gap task, which is used in this study. An information-gap task works when one of the participants in a pair holds information that the other needs to know in order to complete the task.

This kind of activity is constructed so that the learners will use language as a means for sharing information rather than simply for producing language as an end in itself.

Current investigations of tasks tend to focus on the second category, i.e., the communicative category. "Task" is variously defined in the literature. Long (1985) defines task as "the many things people do in everyday life, at work, at play, and in between" (p.89). For example he included filling out forms, checking out books from the library, buying a pair of shoes, making airline reservations, and other similar activities. These examples preceded Nunan's (1993) proposal that, in order to be optimally effective in the classroom, communicative tasks should have a real-life rationale. In other words, task refers to activities in which learners comprehend, produce, and interact in the L2 context. Nunan (1993) captured this common characteristic when he defines a communicative task as "a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather that form" (p.59). Willis (1996) also proposed that "a task is a goal oriented activity in which learners use language to achieve a real outcome", in other words learners use whatever target language resources they have in order to solve a problem, do a puzzle, play games or share and compare experiences (p.53).

2.1 Task Components

Task- based language learning is an approach that views the task that learners do as central to the learning process. The learning process is seen as a set of communicative tasks. Nunan (1991:279) outlines "The five characteristics of a task-based approach to language learning":

1. An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language.

2. The introduction of authentic texts (teaching materials) into a learning situation.

3. The provision of opportunities for learners to focus not only on language, but also on the learning process itself.

4. An enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning.

5. An attempt to link classroom language learning with language activation outside the classroom.

He views the task as a piece of meaningfully focused work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing and interacting in the target language. Specifically, tasks can be analyzed according to the goals, the input data, the activities derived from the input, the setting and roles implied for teacher and learners.

Nunan graphically depicts a way to analyze the various elements of tasks, as shown in Figure 1.

Goals   Teacher role

Input   →   TASKS ←   Student role
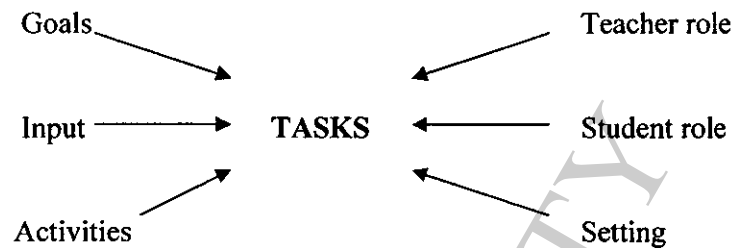
Activities   Setting

Figure 1. A framework for analyzing communicative tasks (Nunan 1989:11)

To conclude, goals refer to the general intentions for the learning task. Input holds the data that forms the point of departure for the task. Activities specify what learners will actually perform with the input. Roles refer to the social and interpersonal relationships between the learners and the teachers in a task; however the teacher's role is simply to set up the task, but not to be a part of the task. Setting up refers to the classroom arrangement affecting interaction in the task. When selecting, adapting, modifying and creating communicative tasks, Nunan believes that all of the above components are needed.

2.1.1 Theoretical Rationale for Task

The theoretical perspective which supports the use of communicative tasks is that language is best learned through interaction. Long (1980) stated that language learning is assisted through the interaction of learners, particularly when they negotiate towards mutual comprehension of meaning. This means that learners request input, obtain feedback, and then respond through modifications (Swain, 1985). These theories have led to the claim that the interactional adjustments and repairs (e.g., requests for clarification, and the like) through which learners carry out a task, facilitate comprehension, feedback and interlanguage modification processes for language acquisition.

Results of such research have led to claims that certain types of tasks are particularly effective at generating negotiation, which in turn, facilitates comprehension, feedback, and interlanguage modification processes of language acquisition (Pica, Kanagy and Falodun, 1993). However, later work suggested that not everything that is comprehended is necessarily also acquired and that comprehensible input alone was not enough (Long, 1996). Despite the important contributions that task-based research has made in supplying data and supporting theories on SLA, very few studies have actually successfully linked negotiation functions found during task interaction with acquisition processes. This may be the reason why language acquisition is difficult to analyze, especially with experimental studies. As a result, most of the contributions of task-based research on interaction have been inferential i.e., the presence of negotiation and its accompanying

interactional adjustments have implied learner comprehension, use of feedback and modification of interlanguage production.

Results of the studies by Swain, 1985; Nunnan, 1991; Pica, Kanagy and Falodun, 1993; and Long, 1996 mentioned earlier in this chapter revealed not only higher comprehension scores for the learners in the interactionally modified input condition, but also more interactional adjustments which accompanied the learners' comprehension. It was found that negotiation features such as clarification-requests, confirmation-checks and comprehension-checks served as mechanisms for input redundancy and repetition, which in turn enhanced the learners' comprehension. However, no follow-up investigation was performed to determine whether this instance of one-time comprehension by the learners resulted in language acquisition.

Other non-inferential studies conducted by Pica (1989, 1990, 1991) have looked at learner production, particularly modification of interlanguage in response to Native Speaker (NS) feedback. In these studies, the information-gap task, which required learners and NS interlocutors taking turns drawing and describing pictures for each other to replicate. This was shown to provide greater opportunities for learners to produce the target language and to signal their need to understand NS descriptions. The task also provided learners with greater opportunities to receive NS feedback regarding their own descriptions, leading to greater amounts of modified interlanguage production in response.

Very few studies have examined the relationship between different types of conversational interaction and language acquisition. Long's (1996) updated version of The Interactionist Hypothesis claims that implicit negative feedback, which can be

obtained through negotiated interaction, facilitates language acquisition. Support for The Interaction Hypothesis has been provided by studies which have explored the effects of interaction on production for specific interactional features such as recasts', which have been defined as "a target-like way of saying something which was previously formulated in a non-target way" (Long, Inagaki and Ortega, 1998; Mackey and Philip, 1998).

In sum, previous researchers have hypothesized that negotiation of comprehensible input is crucial to language acquisition. Swain (1985) claimed that negotiation of meaning is a first step to acquisition because when the message is understood, the learner is free to pay attention to form.

2.2 TASK- BASED LEARNING (TBL)

Willis (1998, pp.1-2) describes a learning and teaching process of TBL that consists of 3 phrase, pre-task, task cycle and language focus. He started with pre-task phase, which is the introduction to topic and task. This means that teacher explores the topic with the class, highlights useful words and phrases, and helps learners understand task instructions and preparation. Learners may hear a recording of others doing a similar task, or read part of text as a lead into a task. This is followed by a task cycle process by doing the task-based activity. That is when students are planning or preparing to report to class. The last process of the cycle is to present their reports to the class. At this stage, the researcher feels that the first step of the cycle is the most significant. As Willis stated, students do the task in pairs

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or small groups, at the same time their teacher monitors from a distance, encouraging all attempts at communication, not correcting. In the other words, mistakes do not matter. The last phrase is the language focus, which was divided into the analysis stage and practice stage. In the analysis stage, students examine and then discuss specific features of the text or transcript of the recording. They can enter new words, phrases and patterns in vocabulary books. In the practice stage, the teacher conducts practice of new words, phrases, and patterns occurring in the data, either during or after the analysis.

To conclude, this framework from Willis (1998) outlines a process by which the learners can do a task systematically and have a goal-oriented activity with a clear purpose. Learners get exposure at the pre-task stage, and chance to recall things they know. The task cycle gives them speaking and writing exposure with opportunities for students to learn from each other.

2.2.1 Advantages of TBL Curriculum

Nunan (1989) argues that tasks appear to be particularly good at training learners how to use the L2 to produce L2 acquisition, and we can assume that this will prepare them well for accomplishing some real world tasks outside the classroom. Task-based learning may be very effective within English for Specific Purposes approach in which a major aim is to train learners to perform specific 'real-world' tasks. Tasks could also form part of a general English approach if one is able to identify target tasks, which one would like the learners to be able to perform in the world outside the classroom (as cited in Seedhouse, 1999).

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According to Rooney (2000), among the other advantages of using a task-based approach to language teaching is that it allows for a needs analysis, thus allowing course content to be matched to identified student needs. In addition, it is supported by a large body of empirical evidence, thus allowing decisions regarding materials design and methodology to be based on the research findings of classroom-centered language learning. This distinguishes it from other syllabus types and methods, which have little empirical support. Furthermore, it allows evaluation to be based primarily on task-based criterion-referenced testing. Students can now be evaluated on their ability to perform a task according to a certain criterion rather than on their ability to successfully complete a test. Finally, it allows for form-focused instruction that is, a grammar or structure focused instruction.

Krashen (1976) also describes a naturalistic L2 as the acquired system that consists of the subconscious knowledge of the L2 grammar. He also describes the instructed L2 as the learned system and conscious knowledge of L2 grammatical rules. TBL instruction does not ignore form-focused instruction as it is used in the pre-task stage and language focus stage of TBL process. In this study, the learners experience both the naturalistic L2 learning and the instructed L2 learning.

According to the strong points mentioned above, TBL promotes learners' use of L2 through performing tasks that will be beneficial not only in the classroom but also outside in real world settings. The tasks assigned are according to the learners' needs and the learners can be evaluated on their overall ability to complete tasks by peer and instructor evaluations using the established criteria, not only by discrete written tests.

2.2.2 INITIAL TASK-BASED RESEARCH

The relevant research on task based exercises which was done by researchers is reviewed in this section. An example of a task which was used in this study is provided, together with a discussion of their results. The limitations of these studies are outlined and suggestions are made for further research in the area of task-related variability.

Throughout the 1980s, SLA research paid heavy attention to the input received by Non Native Speaker (NNS) from a Native Speaker (NS). There is a great amount of data and information about the ways NSs interact and communicate or negotiate meaning to L2 learners. The important finding in Long's (1981) study was that the type of task affected the amount of negotiation in NS-NNS conversations. He was one of the very first researchers to suggest that the type of task affected the amount of interactional patterns in NS-NNS dyads. He did a comparison between three two-way tasks and found significantly more negotiation (i.e., confirmation-check, comprehension-check and repetition) on the task which required a two-way exchange of information than the task which required a one-way exchange.

However, there are two studies that report the contrasting results of Long's study. Long, Doughty and Pica (1986) found that more negotiation took place on a two-way task than on a one way task. In contrast, Gass and Varonis (1985) found that a one-way task required more negotiation than two-way task. These studies are discussed in turn below.

Doughty and Pica (1986) report the finding of two studies conducted to see the effects of task-type and participation pattern on classroom language interaction. The results are compared with two constructs: 'optional' and 'required' information. From the evidence they suggested that a task with a requirement for information exchange is crucial for generating a conversation. This finding is therefore significant in light of current theory, which argues that conversational modification occurring during interaction is very important to language acquisition.

An earlier study by Pica and Doughty (1985a) compared conversational interaction in teacher-fronted and group interactional patterns during two Decision-Making tasks. The study examined differences in the amount of modified interaction which occurred during these two types of interactional patterns. Modified interaction is defined here as "interaction which is altered in some way to facilitate comprehension of the intended message meaning" (cited from Doughty and Pica, 1986, p. 306), and it is operated as confirmation-checks, comprehension-checks, clarification-requests, and repetitions. In the teacher-fronted (NS-NNS) activity, the class, together with the teacher who directed the interaction, had to come up with a solution to a problem. The learners were given information about five families, and they then had to choose which family was most eligible to adopt a child. In the group situation, four students working together had to choose among six potential recipients for a heart transplant. Both the teacher-fronted and group situations involved the solutions to make a decision. Because less language proficient students might feel uncomfortable to show their lack of comprehension in front of their teacher or the whole class, it could be that the presence of the teacher may reduce the amount of modified interaction in the teacher-fronted task. In the group situation, on

the other hand, participants sitting face-to-face might be more likely to notice confusion and consequently, check on their comprehension.

Although it was hypothesized that there would be more conversational modification in the group situation than in the teacher-fronted situation, these predictions were not borne out. In fact, the teacher-fronted situation created more conversational adjustments than did the group format. The researchers, however, concluded that these results could not be considered to have great significance, since very little conversational pattern was observed in either situation.

Pica and Doughty (1985a) noted two factors that may have influenced the results, one having to do with the task, the other related to participation pattern. The first concern was with the task employed. Long (1980, 1981, 1983a, 1983b) has stressed the importance of using tasks with a built-in, two-way information-gap. The term "information-gap" refers to the existence of a lack of information among participants working on a common problem. Two-way information-gap tasks (also cited as jigsaw tasks in the literature) are here defined (following Long, 1980) as those tasks which require the exchange of information among all participants, each of whom possesses some piece of information not known to, but needed by, all other participants to solve the problem. The second possible explanation for the outcome of the initial study was that group work, may not have been the optimal format for activating interaction among the students. As in the teacher- fronted situation, the more fluent students among the four in each group studied tended to dominate the decision-making activity.

These two factors led to the design of a second experiment (Doughty and Pica, 1986). The major difference between the two studies was that the tasks which were employed in the second experiment had a requirement for information exchange. In addition, the second study added the comparison of a third interactional pattern, the student dyad, to the teacher-fronted versus group work patterns. In the *Plant the Garden* task, the required information exchange task, each board contained a tree in its center, which served as a point of reference, and a small number of flowers. The object of the task was to arrange the objects according to a master plot. Each participant instructed other participants on which flowers to plant and where to plant them. The first hypothesis was that tasks which required an information exchange for their completion would generate more interaction than those in which such exchange was optional. Also, there would be more comprehension-checks, more confirmation-checks, more clarification-requests, and more repetition in the task.

The results revealed a significant effect for task; i.e., a requirement for information exchange generated more interaction than did a task with no such requirement. Furthermore, the researchers felt that opportunities for communication would be greater in the dyad situation, in which participants interacted only with each other. This reasoning led to their second hypothesis: more modified interaction was predicted to occur in the dyad situation than in the group situation, which in turn would provide more opportunities for communication than the teacher-fronted situation. This hypothesis was confirmed as the group participation pattern resulted in more interaction than did the teacher-fronted pattern.

Two important factors may have influenced the results: one related to the data base, the other having to do with task difficulty. One limitation to both studies is that they are not valid comparisons. The two sets of data were collected from different sets of subjects: i.e., the data for the optional-information exchange task was collected during the first study (Pica and Doughty, *1985a),* while the data for the required- information exchange task were collected during the second study by Doughty and Pica, (1986).

Another limitation is that a different task was used for each group in the first study, and consequently each task may have generated different results in terms of the amount and the complexity of communication needed by each group of participants.

Recent research has shown an interest in differentiating between tasks to determine if it is possible to account for what it is that makes one task more communicatively demanding than another. To date, the notion of task complexity has been largely explained by the distinction made in the literature over differences between one-way and two-way tasks. Long (1981) claims that more negotiation work takes place when learners are forced to exchange information in two-way tasks. However, studies such as Gass and Varonis (1985) and Shortreed (1993) show that the opposite may be true. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, some reports showed that a one-way task is better that a two-way task as Gass and Varonis (1985) found that a one-way task required more negotiation than a two-way task. In the two-way task *(Solve the Mystery,* which required participants to pool clues in order to solve a mystery), subjects had to identify objects which they described to each other, while in the more demanding one-way task *(Draw the Picture),* one member of the dyad

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had to draw the objects being described to him by the other member of the dyad. The second task was more demanding, that drawing a picture is more cognitively demanding than arranging clues.

The researchers concluded that the knowledge on the two-way task (both subjects had access to related clues) facilitated communication, whereas the lack of shared reference in the one-way task led to a greater amount of negotiation.

Similarly, Shortreed's (1993) study was undertaken to test the hypothesis that NNSs would use a higher frequency of interactional patterns in accordance with task complexity. Shortreed used two tasks, both of which were considered one-way tasks. In the first task, a picture recognition task, one member of the dyad was given a set of twenty color pictures which formed a picture grid. The other member of the dyad was given an identical set of twenty pictures but these were cut out and placed in an envelope. The subject with the completed grid of pictures was asked to instruct his or her partner to arrange them in the same order as they appeared on the master grid. In the second task, a picture reconstruction task, one member of the dyad was given a sheet of paper divided into sixteen squares, in which objects were drawn; the other member of the dyad was given instructions to draw these objects in the correct location on his empty square grid.

The results show that the picture recognition task was far simpler for the subjects to complete, since both participants had identical visual clues from the outset (i.e., the same photographs). In the drawing task, only one subject had the information which was to be communicated and for this reason more negotiation work was required to complete the task successfully. Identifying a picture is a much

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easier task than actually having to draw it. The absence of shared reference on the one-way task necessitated a greater amount of negotiation among participants, whereas shared knowledge, as is common in a two-way task, lessened the possibilities for misunderstanding between speakers. Apart from the fact that identifying a picture is a less demanding task in that this requires the exercise of fewer types of cognitive operations than actually having to draw the picture, tasks in which speakers can draw upon a common pool of knowledge help push the conversation forward.

With specific reference to task difficulty and the sequencing of tasks, Samuda and Rounds (1993) have argued that it is possible to identify those characteristics of a task which make it appropriate for particular learners at particular points in time. They found that differences on a *Spot the Difference* task could be categorized into three types. From the perspective of the typology proposed by Pica, Kanagy and Falodun (1993), the *Spot the Difference* task is a problem-solving task; here, however, given that each interactant holds a different portion of the information needed to complete the task, it must be considered a jigsaw task.

The evidence from these studies above suggests that a task with a requirement for information exchange is essential for the generation of interactions. Consequently, many researchers have discounted the opinion-exchange task, believing it fosters the least amount of negotiated interaction. Opinion-exchange tasks do not require this kind of exchange of information. In fact, very little negotiated interaction was observed in a study which compared the learners' production in decision-making and opinion-exchange tasks (Duff, 1986). In addition

with regard to which task provided learners with the most opportunities for negotiation of input, Duff determined decision-making to be more effective, because it provided a greater number of turns for each learner. Decision-making also generated more questions than opinion-exchange.

2.3 From in-class Task to Real World Experience

Most studies which have examined task-related variability have focused their attention on the jigsaw, information-gap, and problem-solving tasks, despite the unnaturalness of these tasks from a communicative point of view (e.g., a task which requires the learners to describe pictures to one another in a dyadic exchange). Examples of jigsaw tasks used as instruments of data collection in the literature include *Plant the Garden*, where bits of information are exchanged to match an unseen configuration of a garden prearranged by the researcher (Doughty and Pica, 1986); *Sequence the Houses*, a variation of the former task (Pica, Holliday, Lewis, Berducci and Newman, 1990); *Solve the Mystery*, where clues are pooled in order to solve a mystery (Long, 1981; Gass and Varonis, 1985); and *Tell the Story*, where details are organized into a story (Hawkins, 1985).

Among the information-gap tasks used as instruments of data collection in the literature are *Draw the Picture* (Long, 1981: Gass and Varonis, 1985: Pica *et al.*, 1989, 1990, 1991), *Matching Pictures* (Hawkins, 1985), and *Assemble the Scene* (Pica, Young and Doughty, 1987). In these tasks, one interactant is asked to either replicate pictures, or choose and position them on an assembly board, on the basis of

information provided by the other interactant. For example, Pica, Young and Doughty (1987) employed an information-gap task where the learners were required to follow directions as provided by a NS in order to select and place items on a small board. These items consisted of cut-outs of plants, animals and humans, which shared at least one similar feature of color or size, and the board was illustrated with items comparable to those of the cut-outs.

In addition to the above task taken from the research literature, examples of tasks which are found in L2 textbooks are presented below, in order to give a more complete picture of the variety of tasks utilized by researchers and language instructors. It should be noted that many of the tasks found in the research literature have been adapted from published materials actually used in teaching English as a L2. For example, the decision- making tasks used in Pica and Doughty (1985a, 1985b). *Who Gets the Heart Transplant?* and *Who Can Adopt the Baby?* were based on Rooks (1981).

Among the jigsaw tasks found in L2 textbook materials is an activity by Harmer and Surguine (1987, p. 75), in which students in dyads are each given a partially completed chart containing different information about four people. The task requires completing the grid by asking and answering questions regarding the activities and locations of these four people, without looking at each other's chart.

An example of an information-gap task found in pedagogical materials is taken from Anger, Fuchs, Pavlick and Segal (1988, p. 94). Here, students are given a list of questions for conducting an interview with a classmate in order to gather information on his birthplace, school, work and family background. Such a task,

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although quite basic, does attempt to replicate those conditions which the learners may well encounter in every day life, unlike those information-gap tasks cited as examples from research.

The above claims were also supported by researchers, Deeprom (1997) developed task-based activities for thirty nine students who were studying Business English I at a vocational college. The results found that the activities used were effective. By utilizing 16 task-based activities, the result of completing each activity showed an increased command of English. The student could utilize authentic input in activities that were applicable to everyday conversation.

Muranoi (2000) examined the impact of interaction enhancement (IE) on the learning of English articles. IE was a treatment that guides learners to focus on form by providing interactional discourse and led learners to produce modified output within a problems-solving task. Two different IE treatments were employed: IE plus formal debriefing (IEF), and IE plus meaning-focused debriefing (IEM). Outcomes of the treatments were compared with the effects of non-enhanced interaction in a quasi-experimental study involving 91 Japanese EFL learners. Progress was measured by pre-test and post-test, yielding these major findings: (1) IE has positive effects on the learning of English articles; (2) the IEF treatment had a greater impact than the IEM treatment.

In summary, research on task-based learning has been carried out in recent years. The concern to be addressed, then, is the designing of tasks which are not only theoretically motivated, but can also encourage what learners do and learn by themselves not only in the classroom context. Thus, the concept of real-world rationale provides useful guidance to the task designer concerned with both practical issues as well as theoretical ones.