

TASK-BASED SYLLABUS DESIGN: SPECIFIC NEEDS IN CURRICULUM

Mohammed K. Ahmed

Introduction

In recent years, task-based language instruction has been gaining considerable attention in EFL/ESL curriculum. In this approach, the starting point for a syllabus design is not any discrete grammatical item, notions/functions, or language macro-skills, but specific tasks that learners need to perform. Therefore, as Long (1985) points out, the notion of task underlies all the major aspects of the syllabus: needs assessment, content selection, learning experiences, and evaluation.

Task has been defined in a variety of ways, ranging from its commonsense everyday meanings to more academic- and language learning-oriented views. Long (1985:89) refers to tasks as simply "the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play, and in between." Examples of tasks would include "painting a fence, dressing a child, filling out a form, buying a pair of shoes..." (Long 1989:89). Thus, in some instances, the performance of a task may not involve any use of language. Crookes (1986:1), who finds a precise definition of task problematic, defines it for practical purposes as "a piece of work or an activity, usually with a specified objective, undertaken as part of an educational course, at work, or used to elicit data for research." Some others view tasks more in terms of language learning experience. Richards, et. al., (1986:289) define a task as an "activity or action which is carried out as the result of processing or understanding language (i.e., as a response). For example, drawing a map while listening to a tape..." Similarly, Breen (1987:23) defines it as "any structured language learning endeavor which has a particular objective, appropriate content, a specified working procedure, and a range of outcomes for those who undertake the task." And for Prabhu (1987:24), from the perspective of his "procedural syllabus," it is "an activity which [requires] learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which [allow] teachers to control and regulate that process..." Underlying all these definitions, as Nunan (1989) points out, is a functional view of language emphasizing its communicative uses. Task-based language instruction is theoretically motivated by such a functional view.

In this paper, I would like to adopt Nunan's (1989:10) definition of 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 than form." In addition, I would like to maintain the position that tasks could be "simple and brief" or "complex and lengthy activities" (Breen 1987:23).

The purpose of this paper is to describe a specific task-based syllabus for English language instruction currently in its initial stage of development at a graduate institution in Japan, namely, the

International University of Japan (IUJ). The paper first introduces an analytical framework for designing a task-based syllabus. In fact, for this framework, I have relied heavily on one specific source, i.e., Nunan (1989). Much of what is presented in this paper, therefore, comes directly from this source.

After introducing the analytical framework, the paper briefly provides some background information about IUJ, its graduate program in business administration (MBA), and its summer intensive English program (IEP). All these are relevant to the focus of this paper, since the task-based syllabus is being developed for the students of the MBA program and offered during the intensive program immediately preceding the regular graduate program. Following the background information, the paper turns to its main discussion, i.e., some important details of the syllabus design for one major task that the students of the MBA program have to perform, namely, the case study. The discussion concerns the analysis of the case study task, principles of a syllabus design, and a planning framework for the syllabus according to the principles. In conclusion, the paper points out what still needs to be done to produce a "task syllabus" (Long 1985) in more concrete terms.

Task analysis

As already mentioned, the beginning point in a task-based syllabus design is the task as the unit of analysis. In other words, the first step in the design is the identification and analysis of task. In this regard, Nunan (1987) provides a practical framework for such an analysis. He proposes to analyze a task in terms of its six components: goals, input, activities, teacher role, learner role, and setting.

Goals are outcome-oriented and in the form of general statements. In other words, they express in a broad manner what the result of a certain experience will be. Input refers to data, verbal or non-verbal, which the individual has to deal with when performing a task. Activity refers to the performance of a task on the basis of goals and input. In addition, it entails specific roles for teacher and learner in a particular setting.

By way of illustrating task analysis in terms of task components, Nunan (1989:11) provides the following simple example from a communicative situation in which pairs of learners interview each other about their sleeping habits:

Goal:	Exchange personal information
Input:	Questionnaire on sleeping habits
Activity:	i) Reading questionnaire ii) Asking and answering questions about sleeping habits
Teacher role:	Monitor and facilitator
Learner role:	Conversational partner
Setting:	Classroom/pair work

Grading, sequencing, and integrating

Following the above analysis of tasks in terms of the components, the next step is to account for the tasks in terms of the three major aspects of a syllabus: grading, sequencing, and integrating. The question of what to teach first, and what to teach next, is crucial in any kind of syllabus implementation.

Nunan suggests that in a task-based syllabus the question of grading, i.e., the determination of difficulty level, could be addressed with reference to the task components, in particular, input, learners, and activities. In other words, the characteristics of these components would determine how easy or difficult a task is. For example, in tasks involving reading input, such factors as text complexity, length, and propositional density; the kind of help that the structure of the text provides to the reader (e.g., headings and subheadings) and the type of text and topic would determine the difficulty level of a task in reading comprehension tasks. In terms of learners, such learner factors as confidence, motivation, prior learning experience, linguistic and cultural knowledge will be important in determining how easy or difficult a task is. Finally, in terms of activity, as distinct from input and learners, factors such as relevance (e.g., personally meaningful) and complexity (e.g., number of steps needed to complete the task) of the task for the learners, time and amount of help available in performing the task, and cognitive and communicative demands imposed on the learners are important factors.

Subsequently, tasks are sequenced according to the principle of increasing complexity in terms of input, learner, and activity factors. Finally, for integrating tasks, the principle of "task continuity" is applicable. In such a principle, "successful completion of prior activities" becomes "a prerequisite for succeeding ones" (Nunan 1989:119).

I would now like to provide briefly some background information about the MBA and the intensive English programs at the International University of Japan before turning to the details of the specific task-based syllabus design which is the focus of this paper.

The MBA program at the International University of Japan

IUJ was established with Japanese government and corporate support in 1982 as part of the internationalization of education currently underway in Japan (for details, see Sawyer 1988). The university, which initially offered a two-year graduate program in international relations to Japanese and foreign students, introduced its MBA program in 1988 with the cooperation of the Amos Tuck School of Business Administration, Dartmouth College, U.S.A. The two-year program is taught exclusively in English by Japanese and American faculty, and the students, besides being drawn from Japan, are also drawn from North America, Europe, and Asia. The curriculum of the MBA program is modelled after Tuck's program and consists of case

discussions, experiential exercises, simulations, individual and group projects, and lectures.

The MBA program's case study approach

The most distinguishing feature of the program may be said to be its case study method (for details, see Sawyer 1989). The method creates a classroom culture in which active, rather aggressive participation on the part of the students individually in classroom case discussions becomes a prerequisite for successful performance in the course. Each student feels obligated to let the professor and others know that he or she is capable of actively contributing to the discussions.

A simple comparison with a traditional class is useful. In a traditional, lecture-oriented class, the students may come to listen to the lecture and take down notes efficiently. Within the classroom setting, thus, there is one-way flow of information with the students on the receiving end. In addition, after the class lecture the students may continue working on the notes and readings. However, in a case study class, the focus is on intensive preparation before the class and on in-class performance. In other words, the students prepare for the discussion before the class and demonstrate their active participation during the class. Once the discussion is over, attention shifts to the next case.

The Intensive English Program

The IUJ's Intensive English Program runs for twelve weeks (late June to early September) immediately preceding the regular program which begins around mid-September. In other words, Japanese students (so far this has been the case) are required to join the intensive program before beginning their regular studies. In fact, the intensive program is viewed as an important part of the MBA program although it has a non-credit status.

The goal of the program is to provide academic and psychological preparation for the MBA program through needs specific courses and extra-curricular activities in an English-only environment. In other words, the program orients students to the academic requirements of the MBA program (e.g., active participation in classroom discussions), provides training in communication skills, and above all, meets their English language needs for the regular program.

The program offers a variety of courses. Some courses cater to developing communication skills, e.g., oral presentation and discussion; others to more formal aspects of language, e.g., grammatical knowledge and accuracy development. Out of these courses, one in particular, namely, Text Skills: International Management (henceforth TS: IM), attempts to create a classroom environment similar to the one the students will face once their MBA program begins. The case study is the core of this course during the intensive program.

The sections below turn to the discussion of task-based syllabus design.

The analysis of the case study task

I would like to categorize the case study in the MBA program as a complex task involving lengthy activities. In terms of "doing" the task, there is what may be called "the case study process," a piece of work or activity that the students have to perform and which involves the integration of all the language macro-skills. The students need to read and understand case materials before the case discussion class, participate actively in the in-class discussion, and furthermore, prepare a case write-up and submit it to the professor before the classroom discussion.

The complex and lengthy task is analyzed in terms of its components as follows:

Goal: The major goal is to be able to recommend solutions to the problems identified in the case along with supporting reasons for the solutions and their implications. However, due to the complexity of the task, the major goal could be divided into three sub-goals (or objectives): a student needs to be able to, first, read effectively case-related texts; second, participate actively in the case discussion; and third, do the case write-up. The syllabus design is based primarily on these sub-goals.

Input: There are various sources of input in the case study task, in relation to the sub-goals. First, there is the reading input, in the form of cases as the primary reading materials, and specific chapters in prescribed texts and recommended journal articles as the secondary reading materials. Second, during the classroom case discussion, the students face mainly listening input. The students have to deal with the questions and comments of the professor and other students, most of which are fast paced. Finally, for the case write-up, the input comes in the form of a "format" or "guidelines" which the professor provides to the students in advance and according to which the students select and organize information in their case write-ups.

Activities: The activities are derived directly from the input. In other words, the students engage in reading, listening, discussion, and writing activities. In reading activities, according to the nature of the input, they not only have to be able to identify surface level information in the form of facts and figures, but also have to be able to evaluate such information in order to identify problems and recommend solutions. Hence, they have to engage in increasingly complex cognitive operations. In case discussion activities, the students have to participate in a variety of in-class communication patterns. For example, they have to be able to respond to professor's questions or comments when asked directly, or volunteer responses on their own to seize the initiative in the class discussion, or cut into an on-going discussion or debate in the form of agreements or disagreements, questions, etc. All these communication patterns require active listening comprehension and impose increasing pressure for participation. The writing activity may yet prove to be the most difficult, partly because it involves the formal

activity of writing, and partly because it imposes maximum cognitive pressure since it is supposed to be submitted before the discussion.

Instructor's role: The role of the instructor is not just that of a monitor or a facilitator. In a typical case discussion class, the instructor begins the discussion by asking opening questions. He usually follows with fast paced follow-up questions and comments. At critical points in the discussion he controls the direction of the discussion. Finally, he carries the discussion to an end within the specified time. However, this is not to say that the instructor dominates the discussion. In other words, the instructor does not present his own opinions or solutions. He does not say directly if some students are right or wrong. At the end, there may not be one solution. He lets a number of solutions emerge, but makes sure that the respective lines of reasoning behind the solutions become clear during the discussions.

Learner's role: As is evident by now, the learner has to play a variety of roles. He has to be an effective reader according to the characteristics of the reading input. He has to be an active participant. Finally, he has to be a competent writer.

Setting: The main setting is the classroom. However, not less important is the outside-the-classroom setting in which the students engage in reading and writing activities.

Principles of syllabus design for the case study task

Several principles serve as the basis for designing a syllabus for the case study task. These principles take into account the analysis of the task and questions regarding sequencing and integrating. The principles are as follows:

Principle One: Bring into the classroom setting all the sub-goals of the case study task, leading towards a simulation of the MBA case discussion class.

This principle takes into account the case study process in the MBA program and the role of the TS: IM course in the intensive program (in relation to the MBA program). In other words, in the MBA program, the case preparation tasks are performed outside and before the case discussion class. The goal of the TS: IM course is, therefore, to train the students in all the tasks (outside and inside the classroom setting) that are required for a successful performance of the case study task in the MBA program. Thus, the principle is to bring into the TS: IM classroom setting all the tasks.

Towards the end of the TS: IM course, however, the objective is to simulate the case study process as it exists in the MBA program. In other words, all the reading and writing tasks are then shifted to the outside-the-class setting and the classroom itself focuses on case discussions.

Principle Two: Develop a series of tasks according to the sub-goals.

This principle provides the basis for determining what kinds of tasks are to be developed. In other words, the three sub-goals of effective case preparation, discussion, and write-up form the framework for developing a series of tasks.

Principle Three: Grade tasks according to their relative cognitive/communicative complexity.

This principle follows from the second and leads into the fourth below. In this third principle, a basis is laid for developing a series of tasks according to the criterion of increasing difficulty as determined by relevant task factors. Thus, for example, in developing case preparation tasks, the focus is first on simple processing of information in reading materials, such as identification of important facts and figures. Tasks that require judgement and evaluation of information come later. Similarly, in oral communication tasks, the tasks focus on developing the ability to respond to the instructor's questions, volunteer information, and finally criticize and defend one's positions and opinions.

Principle Four: Sequence tasks on the basis of (a) the case study process in the MBA classroom and (b) the increasing cognitive/communicative complexity of the tasks in relation to each other.

The principle lays the basis for what comes first and what comes next. First, the MBA case study process entails introducing reading tasks before discussion or writing tasks. Secondly, in reading tasks simple extraction of information precedes the more difficult tasks of evaluation and interpretation.

Principle Five: Develop content-based lesson units.

This principle suggests the incorporation of content from the very beginning. The content is in the form of simplified materials at first. Later, authentic materials in all their complexity are introduced.

Principle Six: Provide specific feedback after task performance.

This principle suggests the importance of constant feedback for developing one's awareness of task performance. However, in line with the explanation of the principle below, the feedback is provided after, not during, a task performance.

Principle Seven: Focus on grammar/linguistic form/accuracy according to the formal or communicative nature of the task.

This principle ensues from a communicative view of language in which focus on the formal aspects of language is subservient to the focus on

meaning and communicative uses of language. The task-based syllabus design is based on such a communicative view of language.

A planning framework for the task-based course.

Based on the above principles (in fact, the first five), the syllabus design is made more specific in the form of a planning framework. The framework is presented in terms of "stages." Stages imply a chronological sequence for a task-based course and incorporate the principles of syllabus design.

Stage One

- Orientation to the case study task
- In-class reading activities with simplified case-oriented materials
(Goal: Be able to extract explicit/main information.)
- Oral communication activities.
(Goal: Be able to respond to the instructor's questions.)

In this first stage, the students are given orientation in the case study process as it exists in the MBA program. It is important that the students are aware of the goals of the course. Then, the course begins with a series of simple and easy reading and oral communication tasks. Two points are important at this stage. The materials at this stage are not authentic, i.e., not the exact materials that the students will be going through in the MBA program. For example, ESL textbooks for the case method are used (see Grosse and Grosse 1988; Sawyer-Laucanno 1987). Secondly, reading and oral communication tasks do not have to be separate and discrete. In fact, integrated tasks are developed in which the students are given reading materials and their reading comprehension is developed by means of oral communication tasks.

Stage Two

- Reading tasks
(Goal: Be able to explain implicit information.)
- Oral communication task
(Goal: Be able to volunteer information. Be able to summarize information.)
- Writing tasks
(Goal: Be able to summarize information.)

At this stage, an element of complexity is introduced into the tasks. Thus, reading tasks focus on implicit information, and in oral communication tasks the students, instead of responding to the instructor's questions directed to them, must be able to take the initiative and volunteer information in the presence of other students. In addition, students start performing some relatively easy writing.

Again, at this stage all the tasks are integrated, i.e., oral communication and writing tasks relate to the reading materials. In fact, this integrative approach is followed at all the stages.

Stage Three

- Reading tasks
(Goal: Be able to identify problem (s).)
- Oral communication tasks
(Goal: Be able to present opinions about the problem(s) and agree/disagree with others.)
- Writing tasks
(Goal: Be able to write a "statement of the problem (s).")

Reading tasks demand evaluation of information and the communication tasks become interactive in that the students communicate with each other, in addition to the instructor. The writing tasks focus on the first important part of a case write-up.

Stage Four

- Oral communication tasks
(Goal: Be able to recommend solutions and provide supporting arguments. Be able to criticize and defend.)
- Writing tasks
(Goal: Be able to write "recommendations and supporting reasons," including "implications.")

Reading tasks are pushed outside the class setting. In other words, the students are given case preparation tasks and asked to come to the class prepared for case discussions. In writing tasks they focus on the two other important parts of the case write-up.

Stage Five (Introduction of authentic materials.)

- Reading tasks
(Goal: Be able to understand the structures of texts and the organization of information.)
- Oral communication tasks
(Goal: Be able to respond to the instructor's questions and volunteer information.)
- Writing tasks
(Goal: Be able to summarize information.)

This stage may be considered a turning point in the course. At this stage, authentic materials are introduced. Students are given cases and supporting materials (e.g., selected chapters from texts and journal articles) to work with. In their reading, oral communication, and

writing tasks, they repeat tasks from the earlier stages, but use authentic materials.

Stage Six

- Reading tasks
(Goal: Be able to extract and evaluate information according to some given conceptual/analytical framework and identify problems.)
- Oral communication tasks
(Goal: Be able to volunteer information/opinions. Be able to agree/disagree, criticize, and defend.)
- Writing tasks
(Goal: Be able to write a "statement of the problem(s).")

The various levels of cognitive complexity in the authentic reading input and communicative pressures in oral communication are incorporated into the tasks. As a result, a more genuine MBA case study environment is created.

Stage Seven

- Oral communication tasks
(Goal: Be able to identify problem(s) and recommend solutions. Take initiative to agree, disagree, criticize, and defend.)
- Writing tasks.
(Goal: Be able to do the case write-up.)

Reading tasks for case discussion preparation are shifted to outside the classroom setting. However, the case write-up task remains part of the classroom work. In other words, the students do the write-up after the discussion and as part of classroom activity. This stage leads to the final simulation stage below.

Stage Eight (Simulation stage)

- In-class case discussion tasks

At this final stage, students do all the necessary case discussion preparation outside and before the case discussion class. In addition, they complete the case write-up assignment and submit it to the instructor before the case discussion begins. This is the final simulation stage mentioned in the first principle for this syllabus design.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the syllabus design for the case study task. It has analyzed the complex and lengthy task in terms of its components,

suggested several principles for the syllabus design, and proposed a planning framework for the task-based course.

However, the discussion has been limited and exploratory, and some important issues have not been discussed. One such issue is the content-based aspect of the course. In other words, it has been suggested in the paper that the instructional materials should be based on the content of the MBA case materials. In fact, later in the course, authentic case materials should be introduced. This requires a careful examination of what kind and how much of the authentic materials should be incorporated in a course which is designed to meet the English language needs of the students. Other issues that have not been sufficiently discussed in this paper are that of feedback to the students after task performance and minimum focus on form and accuracy, given the subscription to the communicative views of language. These issues entail important methodological factors and need careful examination.

From the perspective of a classroom instructor, much work still needs to be done beyond the planning framework. In this context, Long's (1985) suggestions for designing task-based syllabuses are useful. Long suggests four steps for syllabus design: obtaining "target tasks" through needs analysis, classifying the target tasks into "task types"; deriving "pedagogical tasks" from the task types; and forming a "task syllabus" by selecting and sequencing the pedagogical tasks. In Long's view, target tasks refer to what the learners actually need to do in some specific domain. Task types are general categories incorporating the common characteristics of several task targets. Pedagogical tasks are classroom tasks that the instructors and the students actually work with. A task syllabus is the sequenced presentation of the pedagogical tasks. From this perspective, the case study task may be considered the single target task, although complex and lengthy. Therefore, there should not be any problem about developing task types. However, much work is necessary for deriving specific pedagogical tasks and forming the task syllabus. In the development of pedagogical tasks, insights gained by L2 classroom-centered research in instructional activities based on task distinctions (e.g., information- or opinion-gap tasks) as well as on small group dynamics should be incorporated.

Another important area of the syllabus design not covered in this paper is evaluation. Without providing for evaluation, a syllabus will not be complete. In this task-based syllabus, as Long (1985:95) points out again, criterion referenced testing holds great promise. In this type of testing, criteria for successful performance established by experts in the field are used to evaluate one's success or failure. These criteria operate as objective standards for evaluation. In the case study task, the perspectives of the MBA instructors teaching the case study courses could be a major source of information for developing such criteria. Based on such criteria, a series of task-related tests needs to be developed.

To conclude, the task-based syllabus has not yet become a widely accepted approach in language instruction. Furthermore, it has yet to

be tested empirically by researchers. However, given the communicative views of language and the importance of needs-based motivation in language learning, the task-based syllabus seems a promising alternative to the more traditional approaches, particularly when the needs of the learners are specific and well-defined. In this paper, I have attempted to make a case for a task-based syllabus design for the case study task. In situations where the case study method is seen as an effective instructional approach, the discussion in this paper should be interesting and useful.

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