

**Task Characteristics, Complexity And Sequencing: A Review
And A Framework For Language Instruction**

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Abstract:

As the interest in task-based language teaching keeps growing, variables like ‘complexity’ and ‘characteristics’ have been systematically investigated and their importance in selecting and sequencing learning tasks found essential for effective teaching (García Mayo, 2007; Robinson, 2011; Liu and Li , 2012). However, taking into account these variables in a task based instruction would seem problematic for a number of language instructors. This article analyses the literature related to the notions of ‘complexity’ and ‘characteristics’ to suggest a workable framework using them as a basis for grading and sequencing learning tasks. The framework simultaneously provides language instructors with tools for making informed decisions in selecting and sequencing tasks for learners.

Keywords: tasks, complexity, characteristics, grading, sequencing, cognitive load, difficulty, framework.

INTRODUCTION

Back in antiquity, Aristotle (in Ethics to Nicomachus, 1103 a) believed that "the things we must learn to do must be done to be learned". The idea that 'doing' equates to 'learning' also appeared in Dewey (1859-1952)'s "learning by doing" and in the philosophy of Freinet (1954). The former argued that learning is at best when resulting from one's own actions and the latter thought that if «... practice really makes perfect, it is in writing that we learn to write. ». Today again, the same idea appears in Prabhu (1987)'s Task-based Instruction and has been acknowledged as a variable of interest in education since the mid- 1960s, when Karl Weick (1965) observed after a study of individuals and groups, that the conflicting results could be explained by uncontrolled variation in the types of tasks used during the experiments. In the same line, more recent studies on task design features and their effects on language learning during task performance (García Mayo, 2007) have highlighted the centrality of task complexity as a factor that importantly affects learner's cognitive ability in performing tasks (Robinson, 2011; Liu and Li , 2012). As such, task characteristics and task complexity are key criteria in choosing and sequencing learning tasks (Gilbert et al., 2009; Kim, 2009; Robinson, 2001). So much so that Eisner (1972:139) points out that educators must carefully study the nature of the tasks they ask learners to engage in at school as these tasks will begin to define what abilities they will develop or will let atrophy. Similarly, for Blumenfeld and Meece (1988), :

« (...)it is necessary to examine how students react to different tasks and how teachers can best present and manage tasks so that students will be active learners willing to use those cognitive and metacognitive strategies associated with achievement, problem solving and critical thinking». (p. 236).

I would therefore seem that the way in which tasks characteristics and task complexity impact on learning is critical in keeping students engaged in performing tasks and in staying on task till completion. Also, awareness of the cognitive demands task types require from learners would open up the possibility for educators to appropriately select and sequence task in their classrooms.

Our paper aims to raise awareness on the effects of task types or characteristics and task complexity on learning. It is also our intention to provide principled and coherent criteria for the selection and sequencing of tasks in language classrooms. The answers to the following three questions will be essential to meet these objectives.

- How do task characteristics and complexity affect learning in the classroom?
- Which task design factors can be manipulated to impact on task complexity?
- How can task characteristics and Complexity be used in a Task Based Instruction?

First, we will try a clarification of the notion of task. Then we will go on to review some task types and characteristics. After that, the notion of task complexity will be explored, and the distinction between Task-based Language Teaching and Task Supported Instruction explained. Finally we will suggest a framework for preparing and conducting a Task Supported Instruction taking into account the notions of task characteristics and task complexity.

1. What is a task?

A task may be defined as ‘a piece of classroom work’, a ‘workplan’(Ellis, 2003), a learning endeavor motivated by a goal or need generated either by the learning situation with a range of outcomes and, an identifiable result (Breen, 1987; Goulier, 2005) to be reached under specific conditions (Leontiev, 1976), according to an "appropriate content, a specified working procedure" (Breen, 1987 : 23). A task is therefore carried out as the result of processing or understanding i.e. as a response (Richards, Platt and Weber, 1985: 289) that "involves...comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting..." (Nunan as cited in Ellis, 2003: 4) in order to " arrive at an outcome from given information " (Prabhu, 1987:21). Pedagogically and operationally, a task is then used as an intervention tools to stimulate meaningful language practice and to achieve some communicative goal. It is geared toward solving a problem while using various kinds of interaction, deploying cognitive and communicative procedures, and taking advantage of existing knowledge or creating new knowledge (Candlin, 1987: 10). Also, the processes involved in completing a task are:

"intended to result in language use that bears resemblance, direct or indirect, to the language as used in the real world" (Ellis 2003, p.16) .

Definitely, tasks as used for teaching and learning purposes are a purposeful activity involving some cognitive demand for the learners in terms of meaning, needs, aims or outcome-

2. Task types and characteristics

There is ‘a myriad’ of examples of ‘fuzzy edged’ task types in the L2 literature that considerably overlap (Cuesta, 1997). So, to remain within the scope of this paper we will just mention some of them so that a general impression can be gained. These will be organized,

for mere convenience, into ‘bipolar tasks types’, ‘communicative and cognition-focused’ task types, and ‘methodological’ task types.

1. Bipolar task types

Auhors like Nunan (1989), Duff (1986), and Ellis (2003) among others, suggest a description of task types that focuses on the idea of bipolarity; two poles representing opposite sides of the same reality.

Nunan (1989) for example, distinguishes ‘real-world tasks’ and pedagogic tasks. He argues that real-world tasks require learners to use behavior comparable to outside classroom behavior (listening to a weather forecast and estimating the temperature for example) whereas ‘pedagogic tasks’ may require them to listen to a text and decide on true or false statements. They can help provide learners with the skills needed for real-world tasks.

Duff (1986) rather suggests ‘convergent tasks’ (e.g. problem solving) which force students to reach an agreement on a solution or ‘divergent tasks’ (e.g. debating), that require that students express different opinions on a topic, defend their position and/or negotiate with others.

For Ellis (2003), tasks are ‘unfocused’ when they lead the learner to choose from a range of forms and induce him to process some particular linguistic feature as a result of performing activities (Ellis, 2004). They are ‘focused’ when «designed to create a context for a pre-determined linguistic feature – for example, a specific grammatical structure or a set of vocabulary items» (Ellis, 2014:104) and require concentration on a specific linguistic feature. An example of ‘focused’ task may be ‘finding a picture’- an activity that requires the learner to describe the picture using for example the preposition of place ‘on’ so that his/her partner can identify which picture it is, from the same set. (Ellis, 2004, cited by Ahour and Shemshadsara, 2015, p.125).

2. Three or more bi-polar task types

Some other authors, namely Long (1990) and Richards and Rodgers (2001) consider task types as made up of three or more features.

Long (1990)’s suggestion includes three task features. These are:

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- Open/closed tasks: whether learners believe there is one right answer or many possible right answers; and
- Planned/unplanned: whether an activity provides time for learners to plan the language they will speak or write;
- One way / two way tasks: One-way occurs when one person holds information which other group member(s) do not have. A two-way information gap occurs when each group member holds unique information..

Richards and Rodgers (2001: 187) go along with Long but add five other task features to his classification, namely:

- Collaborative or Competitive tasks: whether students collaborate to carry out a task or compete with each other on a task.
- Single or Multiple outcomes tasks: whether there is a single outcome or many different outcomes.
- Concrete or abstract language tasks: whether the task involves the use of concrete language or abstract language.
- Simple or complex processing tasks: whether the task requires simple or complex cognitive processing.
- Simple or complex language tasks: whether the linguistic demands of the task are relatively simple or complex, and
- Reality based or not reality based tasks: whether the task mirrors a real world reality or is a pedagogical activity not found in the real world.

3. *Communicative and cognitive task types*

Task types have also been classified according to communicative and cognitive processing principles.

Brown, Anderson, Shilcock & Yule (1984)'s classification consists of three distinctive features: (1) static tasks (e.g. description), involving simple transmission of information in a linear sequence, often using easily prescribed language, (2) dynamic (e.g. narration), involving the speakers in two-way conversations in which language is not prescribed, and in which relations may vary, and (3) (e.g. opinion-giving) which are more difficult because of the number of elements, participants, and relationships.

Similarly, Prabhu (1987: 46-47), using the same principle, considers three main categories. These are:

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- information-gap activity “which involves a transfer of given information from one person to another—or from one form to another, or from one place to another—generally calling for the decoding or encoding of information from or into language,
- reasoning-gap activity, which involves deriving some new information from given information through processes of inference, deduction, practical reasoning, or a perception of relationships or patterns and
- opinion-gap activity, which involves identifying and articulating a personal preference, feeling, or attitude in response to a given situation”.

Pica, Kanagy, and Falodun (cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2001) following Prabhu(1987) identify three task types: (1) jigsaw (construct a whole from different informational parts) (2) information-gap (groups of students who have different sections of a text to share text information with each other in order to form a complete text) , (3) problem solving (learners to find a solution to a problem), decision-making (learners attempt to make a joint decision by negotiating and discussing solutions), and opinion exchange tasks(discussions among learners).

Finally Willis (1996) enumerates six different types of tasks involving cognitive processing and communicative abilities. These are: 1-listing, (learners collectively try to generate a list according to some task criteria), 2- Ordering (students rank items or events in a logical order based on criteria that help them classify things under categories.), 3-Problem solving: e.g. puzzle, logic problems, predictions (learners’ are use their intellectual and reasoning capacities to find a solution to a problem), 4-Sharing personal experience: storytelling, anecdotes, reminiscence (learners talking about themselves and sharing their own experiences), 6- Project and creative tasks: class, newspaper poster, survey, fantasy, etc. (through a project task, learners, in pairs or groups, create their own imaginative products).

4. *Methodological features*

Cauldron and Valcárcel (1988) and Prabhu (1987), like Long, suggest three task types but their typologies are developed for didactic- methodological purposes:

- Tasks controlled by the teacher (e.g. reading aloud questions and answers games, exercise, translation , dictation, explanation of content , copying, recognizing , identifying , reviewing),
- Semi-controlled tasks (e.g. dialogue, information exchange, questions and answers games, storytelling, brainstorming) and,

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- Free tasks (e.g. role playing, simulation, discussion, problem solving, games, writing, dramatization.)

For a general overview figure 1 below summarizes the entire task types mentioned.

Figure1: An overview of task types

<i>Two Bipolar features</i>			<i>Three or more bipolar feature</i>
Nunan (2001) 1. Real world pedagogy 2. Logic	Duff (1986) 1. Convergent 2. Divergent	Ellis (2003) 1. Focused 2. Unfocused	Long (1989) 1. Open (divergent) and close (convergent) 2. One way task vs two way task 3. Planned vs unplanned
<i>Communicative and cognitive features</i>			Richards and Rodgers (2001) 1. One way task vs two way task 2. Divergent or Convergent 3. Collaborative or Competitive 4. Single or Multiple outcomes 5. Concrete or abstract language 6. Simple or complex processing 7. Simple or complex language 8. Reality based or not reality based
Brown and Yule 1. Static relationships 2. Dynamic relationships 3. Abstract relationships	Prabhu (1897) 1. Information gap 2. Reasoning gap 3. Opinion gap		
Willis (1996) 1. Listing 2. Ordering 3. Comparing 4. Sharing personal experiences Creative	Pica, et al., (1993) 1. Jig.saw gap 2. Information gap 3. Problem solving 4. Decision making 5. Opinion exchange		
			<i>Methodological features</i>
			Cauldron and Valcárce (1988), 1. Tasks controlled by the teacher 2. Semi-controlled tasks 3. Free tasks

It appears that task types cannot easily be put into a coherent framework, yet they may be labeled from either the perspective of the teacher (methodological features), the perspective of the learners (cognitive and communicative demands), and from the perspective of the task itself (simple or complex, concrete or abstract, etc).

The variety of task types is also an indication that their complexity is a key issue.

3. Task complexity: definitions, models and operation

The concept of a task complexity is key to understanding the nature of some the difficulties learners encounter in carrying out learning tasks. So, how can the concept be defined? And how can task complexity be manipulated for teaching and learning purposes?

Task complexity may be explained in terms of “the basic, most general characteristic of cognitive demand” (Bedny et al., 2012 p. 236) or workload, i.e. the extent to which a particular task is inherently easy or difficult (Ellis (2003:351). In that sense complexity is "related directly to the task attributes that increase information load, diversity, or rate of change" (Campbell, 1988, p. 43) and is "the result of the attentional, memory, reasoning, and other information demands imposed by the structure of the task on the language learner" (Robinson, 2001 p. 29). Thus, the same learners will perform differently in different any two tasks depending on complexity factors which basically concern the cognitive demands imposed by the structure of the task on the language learner (Ellis, 2003; Robinson, 2001, 2007).

‘Task complexity’ may then be distinguished from ‘task difficulty’, a learner dependant dimension related to factors like aptitude, working memory and affective variables (Robinson, 2001). For Li and Belkin (2008) and Kim (2006) the difference between these two concepts also lies in the fact that ‘difficulty’ results from a subjective perception by task doers. Weick (1965), Hackman (1969) and Wood (1986) (cited by Haerem, Pentland and Miller, 2015) similarly argue that it is key that no confusion be made between the task and the task doer. Task characteristics should therefore be distinguished from non-task elements and task effects should be described independently of individuals who perform the tasks (Wood, 1986). In other words, there should be a separation between the "task itself", (a) the person doing the task, (b) the context in which the task is performed, and (c) the pattern of behavior required to perform the task (Hackman, 1969). From the foregoing, we may have a look at Wood (1986), Skehan (1996), and Robinson (2005) descriptions of the concept.

For Wood (1986) views task complexity as a linear combination of three elements: (1) ‘*components complexity*’ (the more steps involved in completion of tasks, the more complex these tasks are), (2) ‘*coordinative complexity*’ (the length of the interdependence between the steps of a task also increases complexity). And, (3), ‘*dynamic complexity*’ (the degree to which the relationship between task-related input and output cues changes over time).

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Skehan (1996) rather considers, task complexity as jointly determined by (1) *code complexity* i.e. the lexical and syntactical complexity likely to influence learner’s ability to comprehend, (2) *cognitive complexity*, or the cognitive demand of processing of the input material, and (3) *communicative stress* that refers to performance conditions like time limits, length of the texts, and the number of participants in an interaction (Skehan, 1998; Skehan & Foster, 2001). As it appears in Figure 2, only code complexity and cognitive complexity directly relate to the task.

Figure 2 : Skehan’s task difficulty model. Based on Skehan (1998)

Code complexity	Cognitive complexity	Communicative stress	Learner factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Linguistic complexity and variety - Vocabulary load and variety 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cognitive familiarity - Familiarity of topic - Familiarity of discourse - Familiarity of task - Cognitive processing - Information organization - Amount of computation - Clarity of information - Sufficiency of information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Time pressure - Scale - Number of participants - Length of text used - Modality - Stakes - Opportunity for control 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Learner’s intelligence - Breath of imagination - Personal experience

Skehan also puts forward the Limited Attentional Capacity of learners, arguing that ‘ *high reasoning demand tasks will result in low linguistic performance, as there will be less attention available for linguistic accuracy*’ (Ismail & al. , 2012, p.161) whereas cognitively simpler tasks are more likely to allow L2 learners to focus on both linguistic complexity and accuracy insofar as their attention capacity will be less demanded.

Robinson (2001) almost like rather maintains that task complexity emanates from the cognitive demands of each task during task design. Therefore, some cognitively defined factors can be manipulated to bring variation to the cognitive demands required for task performance, and consequently to the quality of learner language output (Gan, 2011:923). As shown in figure 3, task complexity can be manipulated by playing upon two task dimensions: resource-directing and resource-dispersing variables(Robinson, 2003).

Figure 3: Task complexity according to Robinson (2005:5)

Task complexity (Cognitive factors)	Task condition Interactive factors)	Task difficulty (learner factors)
(a) <i>Resource –directing variables</i> making cognitive /conceptual demands	(a) <i>Participation variable,</i> making interactional demands	(a) <i>Affective variables</i> and task relevant-resource differentials

e.g +/- here and now ./- few elements +/- spatial reasoning +/- causal reasoning +/- intentional reasoning +/- perspective taking	+/- open solution +/- one way flow +/- convergent solution +/- few participants +/- few contributions needed +/- negotiation not needed	h/l working memory h/l reasoning h/l task switching h/l aptitude h/l field independence h/l mind-intention reading
((b)Resource-dispersing variables making performative/procedural demands	(b)Participant variable , making interactant demands	(b)Affective variables and task relevant-state-trait differentials
+/- planning +/- single task +/- task structure +/- few steps +/- Independency of steps +/- Prior knowledge	+/- some proficiency +/- same gender +/- familiar +/- shared content knowledge +/- equal status and role +/- shared cultural +/- knowledge	h/l openness to experience h/l control of emotion h/l task motivation h/l willingness to communicate h/l field independence h/l self efficacy

Thus, in Robinson(2005)'s model (see task complexity fig.3) *resource-directing variables* make cognitive /procedural demands, in terms of number of task elements, reasoning demands of the task, immediacy of information provided etc. Robinson argues that «by increasing complexity along these dimensions, initially implicit knowledge of the first language (L1) concept-structuring function of language becomes gradually explicit and available for change during L2 production» (2011, p.15). On the other hand, *resource-dispersing dimensions* make increased performative/procedural demands on participants' attentional and memory resources in terms of planning time, number of tasks, prior knowledge etc.. In this dimension 'an increase in complexity reduces attentional and memory resources with negative consequences for production, since it creates problems for learners attempting to access their current repertoire of L2 knowledge' (Robinson, 2003) (cited by Umi Kalsom Masrom, 2015, p.81)

In summary, no matter the terminologies used, Wood, Skehan and, Robinson seem to agree that task complexity is determined by 'in-built factors' pertaining to the task itself as well as peripheral and external factors related to the learner and the condition in which the task is performed. Yet, there is some disagreement on the effects of an increase in task complexity. Skehan's model predicts that increasing the reasoning demand of tasks will result in lower linguistic performance because of lack of attention to accuracy whereas for Robinson, it will result in more accurate and linguistically complex task performance and more meaning negotiation. The question therefore is: how can tasks be rationally selected and sequenced so that they result in increased learner performance and learning?

4. Task grading and sequencing

According to Long and Crookes: "Identification of valid, user-friendly sequencing criteria remains one of the oldest unsolved problems in language teaching of all kinds"(1992, p. 46). Even though, many grading and sequencing criteria have been suggested, these have largely been done on an arbitrary basis (Long, 1992). We suggest in the following lines sequencing tasks taking into account, the actors in the classroom i.e. the teacher and the learner, the task demands (complexity) and the task conditions.

Prabhu (1987) argues that tasks should be sequenced by increasing complexity based on whether and to what degree their 'reasoning demands' posed a 'challenge' to learners. However, they should not be too easy and should be met with some efforts. This sequencing he also believed should be made by teachers on a 'reasonable challenge' basis, 'ordered by a commonsense judgment of increasing complexity' (Prabhu 1987:40) and according to "teachers sense of plausibility" (1990, p.172). In the same vein, Ellis (2003) contends that "grading tasks cannot follow a precise algorithmic procedure but rather must proceed more intuitively in accordance with a general assessment of task complexity" (2003: 227) and according to learners' developmental or 'tailored to the proficiency levels of the students' (Ellis 2009 24)1. Likewise, Breen (1987b: 163) does agree that tasks sequencing be based on the learner, specially taking into account 'the relative inherent complexity of the task in terms of the demands placed upon him.'

Candlin (1987) and Nunan (1989) proposed a set of criteria for decision making about grading and selecting tasks based on both the learner and the task. Candlin's set of criteria includes:

- (1) *cognitive load*: a task which requires learners to work according to a comprehensible chronological sequence, will obviously be cognitively less demanding than a task which does not seem to follow a clear procedure and is complicated by numerous actions and various actors.
- (2) *communicative stress*: tasks can be more stressful when they interlocutors who are seen either native speakers or superior knowledge and proficiency .
- (3) *particularity and generalizability*: when the goal of the task is clear will be easier to to manage than one with no clear order or norms of interpretation.
- (4) *process continuity*: this derives from the familiarity of the task as well as the learner capacity to relate the task to tasks they are familiar with; and,

(5) *code complexity and interpretative density*: this has to do with the simplicity or difficulty of the linguistic code on the one hand and the complexity of the operations which need to be carried out on such a code, on the other hand.

Nunan (1989)'s comprises :

- 1- task input factors (for example, a text made up of simple sentences is likely to be simpler than one consisting of non-finite verb constructions and subordination),
- 2- - Learner factors (they include background knowledge, linguistic knowledge, confidence, interest, motivation, ability), and
- 3- Procedural factors (the operations that the learners are required to perform on input data).

It is notable however, that Nunan (1989) and Candlin (1987) in addition to the factors pertaining to the task dimension, also includes other criteria such as 'input factors' and 'communicative stress' that apparently to refer to task conditions.

Skehan (1998) rather advocates 'an appropriate difficulty' criterion in task selection to encourage learners to respond to challenges that they perceive as achievable with effort (Willis, 1996). He also suggests that code complexity (formal lexical and morphosyntactic aspects) be considered along with the cognitive complexity (of the content), and communicative stress (the amount of pressure under which learners will be expected to perform the task).

To Robinson (2001), pedagogic tasks should be designed and sequenced on the basis of increases in their cognitive complexity in order to gradually approximate, in classroom settings, the full complexity of real world target tasks demands (Robinson and Gilabert, 2007) This gradual increases, based solely on cognitive complexity factors, should first be on the resource-dispersing dimension that place performative/procedural demands on the learner and second on resource-directing dimension that place cognitive/ conceptual demands on the learner (Robinson, 2010) .

Definitely, can any task grading and sequencing algorithm for all language teachers and learners be suggested? From the forgoing, it appears that the most general principle governing task selection and sequencing is not only complexity but the learners' characteristics as well as task characteristics. So, how can students be engaged into learning based on task characteristics and complexity? To answer this question, it is necessary that the idea of task based instruction be first clarified.

5. Task Based Instruction

Task Based Instruction is considered either as a branch of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) or as a natural progression from it, based on a shift to a more holistic, meaning-oriented, and learner-centered instruction (Van den Branden, Bygate, & Norris, 2009). This shift has engendered two task based approach versions.

5.1. Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT)

TBLT, considered a strong version of Task Based Instruction, is essentially based on meaning-focused tasks treated as units of teaching in their own right. The assumption here is that

"tasks will engage naturalistic inquisitional mechanisms, cause the underlying inter-language system to be stretched, and drive development forward"(Skehan, 1998, p. 95).

In approaching instruction this way, it is hoped that learners will acquire the target language system using their own linguistic resources (Ellis, 2009) to perform a series of activities that constitute the steps leading to a successful task realization. They will, in so doing, actively experiment with their store of knowledge and use skills of deduction and independent language analysis.

Task Based Language Teaching is also said to be process-oriented and 'enabling' (Prabhu, 1987) as it creates the conditions for learners to develop their capabilities in applying, reinterpreting, and adapting the knowledge of the language system as they communicate. No wonder then that more importance is given to communication and to fluency rather than accuracy- any attention to form (grammar or vocabulary) being considered as increasing the likelihood of learners being distracted from the task itself and become preoccupied with making errors.

Basically, the framework for a Task-Based Language Teaching lesson comprises:

- a pre-task phase where unknown or unfamiliar vocabulary or structures are made clear in order to prepare learners to perform the task in ways that will support acquisition.
- a while-task phase where students carry out and present the task, typically in small groups and teacher provides help if necessary. And,
- a post-task stage during which language items are revised.

For its advocates, one of its essential advantages of TBLT is that it allows previously acquired knowledge to easily be transferred to new communicative contexts (Nunan,1989).

Also, as TBLT focuses on meaning, the learner is forced to use language authentically (Breen 1989 as cited in Ellis, 2009) i.e. he uses previously learned vocabulary, meets and explore new vocabulary (Newton, 2001). It appears however that TBLT underrates the importance of linguistic forms and language accuracy in learner-learner interaction (Seedhouse, 1999; Ellis, 2000; Swan, 2005). Moreover, in actual fact, variables like cognitive load and clarity of the goal of the task, code complexity and interpretive density of the language may adversely affect learner performance in a TBLT class (Candlin, 1987 as cited in Tavakoli, 2009)

5.2. Task-Supported Instruction (TSI)

TSI is considered a weak version of Task Based Instruction where «tasks are not seen as a means by which learners acquire new language or restructure their inter-language, but simply as a means by which learners can activate their existing knowledge of the L2 by developing fluency» (Ellis, 2003:30). Also, tasks are used "as means of providing practice for language items like structures and grammatical features" (Andhra Pradesh, 2005:2771). They are therefore '... a vital part of language instruction' and are embedded in a more pedagogic context. They are generally be preceded by focused instruction and may be followed after use, by focused instruction which is contingent on task performance (Skehan, 1996, p. 39).

Task Supported Instruction considered closer to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) may be associated with the methodological approach known as the 3Ps where the first P stands for the presentation phase (language item is presented), the second P for the practice phase (the language item is practiced in a controlled manner using exercises) , and the third P corresponds to the production phase (learners are given opportunities for free production, i.e. performing tasks).

In our context where Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Competency Based Language Teaching (CBLT) are the norm in the language classes, any reference to task based instruction would mean task supported instruction. As such, the focus is put on both form and meaning and tasks are used are means for practicing and using language in communicative situations. The teacher's role is not only to create learning situations and choose the most appropriate language and communication items, but also to act as a facilitator who chooses and sequences tasks , prepares learners for tasks, and provides feedback. His major challenges will therefore be task selection and ask sequencing. So, how

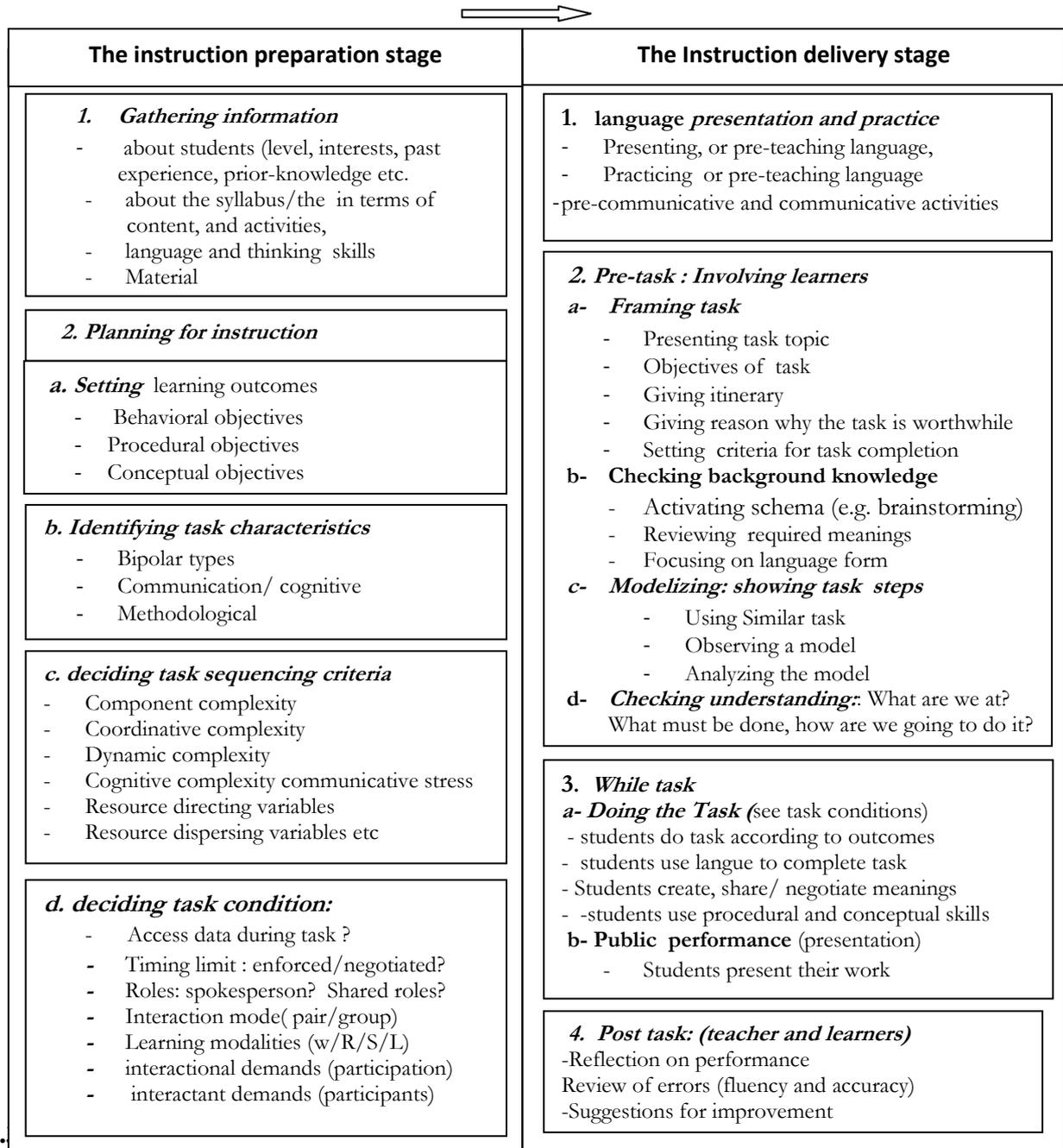
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can a lesson a TSI be framed using the principles task characteristics, task complexity and ideas about task grading and sequencing?

5.3. *Preparing and conducting a TSI lesson type: a classroom framework*

We suggest a framework is made up of two essential stages: the instruction preparation stage and the instruction delivery stage.

Figure 4: A TSI classroom framework using task characteristics and task complexity



5.

This phase includes: 1-gathering knowledge, 2-setting learning outcomes, 3-identifying task characteristics, 4-sequencing tasks, and 5-setting task conditions.

1- Gathering information

Before instruction the teacher will need to gather what he already knows about the learners in terms of prior knowledge, ability and willingness to work together, learning preferences etc. This will call finding answers to the following question: What is my learners' background? Do they have learning preferences? Are they really motivated? The teachers may not immediately have answers to these questions. He may then ask other teachers who have already taught the group or directly ask students using a questionnaire for example.

Also, he will need a good idea to have a good understanding of the syllabus and the manual used in class, the types of skills these favor and the language activities they suggest. So, other useful questions could be : What are the general and specific learning outcomes that the syllabus /textbook seeks to address? What are the task goals?

Lastly, the teacher will need to make a list of the materials and resources necessary for the lesson on the basis of the following questions: Will I need to use authentic materials (magazine and newspaper articles, novels, brochures, and advertisements?), Will I use created materials (Adapted texts, Graphic organizers like charts ?), Will I only use the manual (Textbook and/or learner workbook?)

2- Planning for instruction

During the planning phase, the teacher will want to decide on a clear and explicit presentation of aims of the lesson and the procedure by which they will be achieved. This will imply:

- a- *Setting learning outcomes*: what should students be able to achieve through performing a task and so far as language competence (explain, write etc.) and thinking skills (comparing, contracting, understanding assumptions, etc.) are concerned. Simply put, what do I want his students to be able to do and what kind of thinking do I want them to use? The point here is to have clear direction where he wants to lead his students and to let them know what they are going to learn and what the focus will be.
- b- *Identifying task types and characteristics*: what kind of task will the students have to perform with regard to his learning outcomes? What will the focus be? Will the focus be real word tasks or pedagogic tasks; convergent or divergent task etc.
- c- *Deciding on task grading and sequencing criteria*: this will call for answers to the following questions: how will I (the teacher) order the different in the instructional sequences in such a way that learners can move successfully from one task to the next as they build their language skills and knowledge?

With regard to task characteristics and complexity, the teacher may want to sequence task according to complexity or the linguistic and cognitive demands they are likely to make on learners. If the task topic is, for example 'to present a population week in your school', students may have to design a poster, a leaflet and organize a debate. This may require the teacher to scaffold learning considering whether a task is real world or pedagogic, open or a closed task, convergent or divergent etc.

d- *Setting the task condition:* this has to do with how students will be grouped, how well they know each other, whether planning time is necessary or not, whether learners need some assistance during their performance.

5.3.2. The instruction delivery stage

The instruction phase is about what will actually take place in the classroom. In other words it is the implementation phase of the lesson. The first step consists in formally teaching language.

1. Language presentation and practice

At this stage, the teacher will have to present language items in a context or situation which helps to highlight their meaning. For example, if learners are to complete a task on population increase, language presentation may take the form of picture interpretation, making the description of a graph, or even reading a text for comprehension and summarizing it. Language presentation may also consist of pattern sentences or short dialogues illustrating target items acted out by teacher, read from textbook, or heard on tape. This may be followed by structural exercises or pre-communicative activities to help them memorize language forms and functions. These pre-communicative activities will be followed by communicative activities where students will be given the opportunity to apply their knowledge about language forms and functions, to negotiate meaning and use language communicatively. As Ellis (2005:211; 212) maintains: "Instruction needs to ensure that learners focus predominantly on meaning" and "Instruction needs to ensure that learners also focus on form."

The language learned at the presentation phase will also be needed for task preparation and performance.

2. Pre-task

a- Framing

The pre-task phase aims at preparing students to students' performance and in ways that lead to learning. Here the teacher will first try to achieve clarity, i.e. *causing mental acts within students' heads that will result in their understanding or being able to do the task.*' In other words, clarity is about introducing task and task topic to learners, informing them about the outcome of the task and what they will do to complete the task, explaining the task theme and, showing learners how the language acquired during the presentation phase is essential in completing the task. Clarity definitely involves giving an itinerary or telling learners what they will do and in what order (the sequence of activities). It also includes explaining the criteria for success so that students can use them to self evaluate.

b- Checking prior knowledge and reinforcing language

Another important step in the pre-task phase is the activation of learners' current knowledge about the task topic: 'What do you know about.....?'. Their answers to this question may help the teacher reinforce what is correct or clarify possible confusions and misconception. So, he will ascertain what they already know, and teach them accordingly (Ausubel, 1968).

Prior-knowledge checking could also be the occasion for reviewing language, preparing learners to the use the appropriate vocabulary and language functions meaning fully as learners need to «acquire both a rich repertoire of formulaic expressions, which cater to fluency, and a rule-based competency consisting of knowledge of specific grammatical rules, which cater to complexity and accuracy.» (Ellis, 2005:210).

Prior knowledge checking and language reinforcing paves the way for another step in the pre-task stage.

c- Task Modelization

Here, teacher and students will observe a model, highlight its features, analyze it and break it into parts or into the competencies that make up the larger task. They will discuss the language used, how relevant and appropriate that language is. It should be noted that this step is not to be passive i.e. simply asking students to watch and listen as the main task is being demonstrated by the teacher. Students are encouraged to comment on or ask questions. They will simultaneously discuss different aspects of the main task and take notes about essential language points for performing the task.

d- Checking for understanding

It should never be taken for granted that every student will understand the learning outcomes and task procedure so an important step in preparing learners for task completion is checking for understanding. What are we going to do ? What must be done first, and to next? How are we going to go through all the steps? Which kind of language are we going to use etc.

Once it is clear that students know what they are expected to do. They can now perform the task.

3. While-Task

The while-task stage comprises three steps, all focusing on the completion of the task.

a. Doing the Task (Main task)

Learners, generally in pairs or groups, will do the task making use of all the language they already have and the one they have just learned. The teacher will organize the work in accordance with his decisions regarding task condition (cf.figure 4) namely, about planning, time limit , access to input data during task performance etc. (Ellis, 2004). Also, the teacher will have to monitors students' work and if necessary remind them the guidelines and provides support.

b. Public performance

After task completion students will take turn presenting their work. They will be observed by other groups on the basis of the criteria given by the teacher and according to the learning outcomes. Basically learners will produce, play and/or present their tasks (ex.: a poster production, a role play, a debate, a brochure production, a presentation etc.). As they perform, the teacher who is also a facilitator will take notes about the language: is the vocabulary appropriate? Could we use other words? He may also take notes about some structures: were they properly used? Which functions do they serve?

4. Post task

One the tasks performed, the teacher will want to conduct a feedback session to assess the success of students' performance and consider opportunities for improvement. With the students there will be a reflection upon what has been accomplished: did the groups work constructively? Were the groups' performances successful? What are the student's reactions about the theme? The language input, what they liked and what they did not like etc. The focus here will not only be on task content performance but also on the language used. This will be the occasion for the teacher to explicitly focus on language structure and reminds key grammatical points. Finally the teacher will make suggestions for improvement.

CONCLUSION

For many teachers it would seem that making learners ‘do tasks’ equates to making them learn. As a matter of fact, there is more to a task supported instruction than just making learners do tasks. The nature of the tasks we choose, how we sequence them, alongside students but and teachers. So, this article which set out to reflect on how task characteristics and complexity affect learning and how they can be manipulated to improve learning, has suggested a framework that shows that the role of the teacher plays a significant in preparing and conducting a task supported Instruction. It was apparent that using tasks for language instruction necessarily calls for knowing the students, the pedagogical implications of the use of tasks and framing a lesson that follows a consistent choice and sequencing of tasks taking into account task nature, task type and task complexity. Though, our paper may help providing safe grounds for the designing and conducting tasks supported lesson, the onus also lies on in-service teachers to be innovative and find through their own reading more principled and coherent criteria for selecting and sequencing tasks (within a syllabus or a textbook) in their language classrooms.

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