Redesigning Non-Task-Based Materials to Fit a Task-Based Framework

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The current emphasis on task-based language teaching (TBLT) in the SLA research literature has yet to result in the publication of a significant number of genuinely task-based textbooks. Teachers who wish to use a task-based approach are often faced with having to redesign textbooks which are based on a more traditional approach. This article describes one such redesign project. It presents the rationale for the project, the procedures followed, the main problems encountered, and the author's solutions to these problems.

Introduction

Since the advent of communicative language teaching (CLT) and the belief that language is best learned when it is being used to communicative messages, the communicative task has ascended to a position of prominence as a unit of organization in syllabus design. Research findings in the field of general education (Swaffer et al., 1982), into teachers' actual classroom practices (Shavelson & Stern, 1981), and in second language acquisition have led to claims (Rooney, 1998; Long & Crookes, 1993) that the task syllabus (Long, 1988) has a richer potential for promoting successful second language learning than do other syllabus types (e.g. structural, notional/functional, situational, topical). In fact, one of the most important ideas to emerge from these studies is that where one uses language is less relevant for language learning than what one uses it for, e.g. task.

The rise of task-based language teaching (TBLT) has led to a variety of different interpretations of what exactly constitutes a "task" (e.g. Willis, 1996; Long, 1985; Breen, 1987) and to different proposals for task-based syllabuses (e.g. Breen, 1984; Prabhu, 1984; Long & Crookes, 1992). What all these proposals have in common, however, is that they recognize tasks as being the central component in a language program, endorse the concept of organizing a syllabus around communicative tasks that learners need to engage in outside the classroom, and accept the view that curricula should be learner-centered, rather than language centered.

Among the other advantages of using a task-based approach to language teaching is that it:

1. Allows for a needs analysis, thus allowing course content to be matched to identified student needs.
2. 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).
3. 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 discrete-point test.
4. Allows for form-focused instruction. There is now considerable evidence (Long,1988), particularly from research studies which have compared naturalistic L2 learners to instructed L2 learners, that form-focused instruction within a communicative context can be beneficial.

Despite the current emphasis on TBLT in the research literature, there are as yet few genuinely task-based textbooks on the market (although there are a number of task-based teacher resource books). Some textbook series, (e.g. Nunan's Altas (1995) series) claim to be task-based, but are still based on an underlying grammatical syllabus. Furthermore, teachers are frequently required to use a textbook mandated by the institution for which they teach. Therefore, the only alternative open to many teachers who wish to use a task-based approach is to adapt the materials found in traditional textbooks to fit the principles and procedures of TBLT. Recently, the author found himself in this very situation and undertook a project that involved designing a new program for adult false-beginners studying ESL at a community center in Montreal, Canada by adapting a structural/functional syllabus and set of materials to a task-based one.

The Context for the Project

Montreal's Tyndale-St. Georges' Community Center provides free ESL classes for adult newcomers to Canada. The Center has its own teaching materials, which were provided some years ago. These materials, however, were designed according to structural/functional principles and are now considered to be out of date. Therefore, Tyndale was interested in modernizing its ESL curriculum to reflect the most current linguistic theories and teaching approaches. Due to lack of funds, however, they were unable to purchase a published textbook series. Instead, they asked for materials design projects that would be based on their own in-house materials and the published textbooks they already have at their disposal. The author, therefore, undertook a project to redesign their Level 1, false-beginner program into a new ten-week, forty-hour, task-based program.

Redesigning Structural/Functional Materials to Fit a Task-based Syllabus

In order to bring traditional structural/functional materials into line with the principles of TBLT, it was first of all necessary to arrive at a precise definition of "task" and to develop a particular approach or task-based language (TBL) framework for planning classwork. For the purposes of this project, task was defined as an activity in which "the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (task) in order to achieve an outcome" (Willis, 1996, p. 23). For the TBL framework, a three-phase, pre-task, task cycle, post-task (language focus) process, combining features of the TBL frameworks by Willis (1996), Gatbonton (1994) and Estaire & Zanon (1994) was developed.

The pre-task phase has two basic functions: 1) to introduce and create interest in doing a task on the chosen topic, 2) to activate topic-related words, phrases and target sentences that will be useful in carrying out the task and in the real world. A third, optional function is the inclusion of an enabling task to help students communicate as smoothly as possible during the task cycle.

The task cycle consists of the task(s) plus planning and report phases in which students present spoken or written reports of the work done in the task(s). During the task phase, students work in pairs or groups and use whatever linguistic resources they possess to achieve the goals of the task. Then, to avoid the risk of developing fluency at the expense of accuracy, they work with the teacher to improve their language while planning their reports of the task.

Before or during the task cycle, the teacher can expose students to language in use by having them listen to a recording of other people doing the task, or by having them read a text related to the task topic.

The final phase in the framework, the language focus, provides an opportunity for form-focused work. In this phase, some of the specific features of the language, which occurred naturally during the task, are identified and analyzed. Among the possible starting points for analysis activities are functions, syntax, words or parts of words, categories of meaning or use, and phonological features. Following the analysis activities, this phase may also contain a practice stage in which the teacher conducts practice of the new word, phrases, or patterns which occurred in the analysis activities, the task text, or the report phase.

Perhaps the most noteworthy feature of the above framework is that it moves learners from fluency tasks to accurate production rather than from accurate production of target structures to fluency tasks. Therefore, the central question the author confronted in his attempts to redesign the Tyndale materials was: how can a structural/functional syllabus, which moves learners from accuracy to fluency, be redesigned to fit a TBL framework which moves learners from fluency to accuracy.

To begin the process of creating the new program, it was first of all necessary to develop a plan that could be followed when adapting a unit of structural/functional materials. It was decided that the first step would be to consult the table of contents and find out what functions are covered in the unit. The next step would involve analyzing the various activities that comprise the unit and discover if any of them could serve, or be adapted to serve, as a central communicative task around which a TBL framework could be constructed in order to teach these skills.

Once a task or series of tasks had been decided upon (either by selecting a suitable activity in the Tyndale materials, adapting an activity in order to meet the definition of a task, choosing a task from another source, or designing a new task), the next step was to construct a TBL framework around the chosen task(s). Following this, the author analyzed the remaining activities in the unit to see if any of them could be used, or adapted for use, in the other phases of the TBL framework and then added whatever else was needed to complete the framework.

In implementing this process, the author discovered that good traditional materials can supply some ready-made pair/group work activities that already fit the definition of a goal-oriented task that had been adopted for this project, as well as other kinds of activities (e.g. listening activities, activities for introducing a topic and generating lexical items) that could be adopted virtually as is, or with only minor modifications, for inclusion in the other phases of the TBL framework. Thus, in general, TBLT does not require a teacher to learn new teaching techniques. It is not, as it turns out, a new method, but a new approach, based on familiar techniques, which places task at the center of methodological focus.

Overall, however, attempts to adapt whole units of structural/functional materials to fit a TBL framework revealed that a number of design changes are always required. Two of the biggest challenges, or issues, a designer usually faces are: 1) locating and designing goal-oriented communicative tasks, and 2) designing post-task language focus phases. The following sections focus on these two key issues.

Issue 1: Locating and Designing Goal-oriented Tasks

Coming up with appropriate tasks is critical to the adaptation process because everything the students do is derived from the task(s) and it is the task(s) that generates the language to be used. In most cases, activities from structural/functional sources that are supposed to provide free practice of targeted structures and functions had to be redesigned in order to fit the chosen definition of a task. In a few cases, units did not contain even one activity that could be redesigned to become a task. The following activity is an example of the kinds of activities that had to be redesigned. It illustrates a typical store clerk/customer role-play; a common activity found in units on shopping in lower level texts.

ROLE PLAY Shopping

A. Work in pairs. Collect items in the classroom and place them on your desk (e.g. a pencil, a notebook, a handbag). Take turns being a store clerk and a customer.

- **Clerk:** Decide on a price for each item. Answer the customer's questions.
- **Customer:** Ask the clerk how much each item costs. Say if you want to buy it.

Have conversations such as the following:

- **Clerk:** Hello. May I help you?
- **Customer:** Yes. How much is/are _____?
- **Clerk:** It's/They're _____.
- **Customer:** _____.

B. Switch roles. Do the role play again. The problem here is that this activity is not a real task. As Willis (1996) points out, in this kind of activity, students are being asked to act out their roles with no purpose other than to practice specific language forms. There is no goal to aim for, no reason to strive to explain something fully or to convince someone to follow a particular course of action, and no consequences for the student to face (no winner or loser) if the goal is not met. To make this activity more communicative the author redesigned it as follows:

Role-Play: Shopping

Group A: You are store clerks. Answer the customer's questions. Your goal is to be the first clerk to sell his or her merchandise and make more money than the other clerks.

Group B: You are customers. You have $75. You must buy the items on your shopping list. Different clerks are selling the same kinds of items for different prices. Ask the clerks for the price of the items you have to buy. Decide which ones you want to buy.

- A: Hello. May I help you?
- B: Yes. How much is/are ...?
- A: Which one(s)?
- B: It's/They're...

- A: ...

Switch roles. Do the role-play again.

The activity is now a whole-class mingle task. The clerks have to try to sell their merchandise for more money than the other clerks do and to sell all their merchandise. The customers compete to see who can buy the items on their lists for the least amount of money. Half of the students play clerks assigned to different workstations representing department stores and half play customers. Each department store has four of twelve possible items for sale (e.g. watch, pants, camera, phone, shoes, walkman radio) and each shopping list has four items. The customers, therefore, have to find the stores which are selling the items on their shopping list, ask the clerks how much the items cost (determined individually by each clerk), and get the best deal before the items on their list are sold out. Once a clerk has given the price of an item to a customer, he or she cannot change the price unless that customer comes back to the store after rejecting the initial price. When they finish, they add up the prices and find out who were the most successful clerks and customers. These changes add goals and problems to the activity and make it more communicative.

Issue 2: Designing Post-task Cycle Language Focus Phases

Attempting to fashion post-task cycle language focus phases out of structural/functional materials proved to be a more difficult, labor-intensive process than coming up with communicative tasks. It is here where the fundamental accuracy to fluency direction of structural/functional materials comes most into conflict with the fundamental fluency to accuracy direction of a task-based framework. . The following examples illustrate how constructing a language focus phase requires more than merely reversing the order of presentation in a cycle consisting of a grammar explanation, practice exercises, and a fluency activity. They are typical of the kinds of materials found in the first unit of false-beginner texts. These units usually focus on topics such as greetings, introductions and on asking for and giving personal information. For grammar, they usually focus on yes/no and wh- questions with the verb be and on making statements with the verb be.

The following example shows a standard grammar box presentation of yes/no questions with be.

Verb	Subject	Rest of sentence	Answer
Are	you	single?	Yes, I am
Are	you	married?	No, I'm not
Is	Dave	from England?	Yes, he is.
Is	Mary	your girlfriend?	No, she isn't.
Are	you and Julie	friends?	Yes, we are.
Are	you and Julie	in the same class?	No, we aren't
Are	Jack and Judy	teachers?	Yes, they are
Are	Mr. And Mrs. Lee	Japanese?	No, they aren't

This would then typically be followed by one or more language manipulation exercises such as the following fill-in-the-blanks exercise.

A. Fill in the blanks and then practice the dialogues with another student.

1.

- A: _____ you from Canada.
- B: No, _____ _____. _____ from the United States.

2.

- A: _____ Dave a teacher?
- B: Yes, he _____. _____ an English teacher.

3.

- A: _____ Mario your boyfriend?
- B: No, he _____. Steve _____ my boyfriend.

4.

- A: _____ Koji and Keiko from Japan?
- B: Yes, _____. _____ from Tokyo.

This kind of exercise would serve to help prepare students to do some kind of fluency activity based on the functions covered and on yes/no and wh- questions with be (assuming wh- questions with be had also been covered in a similar fashion). Typical activities found at this point include partner interviews (e.g. partners ask each other questions such as: What is your name?, Are you named after someone?, Where are you from?, Are you married? What are your hobbies and interests? etc., and then report their findings to a group or the whole class.), some kind of role play (e.g. students assume the identity of a famous person and answer personal questions), or a mingle activity (e.g. Find a student who ... has a birthday in the summer, ... is named after a famous person, etc.).

The problem with the kind of grammar exercise shown above is that students are only being asked to manipulate and apply language structures rather than analyze them for the purpose of developing a deeper understanding of how they work. Therefore, a completely new design is called for. However, for an analysis activity to work, students must be provided with at least two closely related linguistic features that will enable them to induce the underlying rules through comparative analysis. The problem with units that focus on yes/no, and wh- questions with be is that these structures are not closely related and there is no way for students to figure out how one works by comparing it to the other. The author's solution to this is to include yes/no questions with do/does in the same unit, along with yes/no questions with be. This would allow for a task such as the following "get to know your classmates" task. It is based on information gathered informally from the students over the course of the first unit.

Talk to your classmates. Write a classmate's name only once.

Find someone who ...

    Name
1. ... speaks three languages.
   "Do you speak three languages?" _____
2. ... comes from a large family.
   "Do you come from a large family?" _____
3. .....has a brother who is a teacher.
   "Is your brother a teacher?" _____
4. ...family lives in Ottawa.
   "Does your family live in Ottawa?" _____
5. ...is named after someone famous.
   "Are you named after someone famous?" "Who?" _____
6. ...name has a meaning.
   "Does your name have a meaning?" What is it?"
7. ... father is in the military.
   "Is your father in the military?" _____
8. ... is living with his/her family?

"Are you living with your family?" _____
9. ...mother is from turkey.
   "Is your mother from Turkey?" _____
10. ...sleeps until 11:00 on Sunday.
    "Do you sleep until 11:00 on Thursday?" _____

B. Pair work. Compare the information you found with the information found by a partner.

This task now allows for the following language focus that involves students in analyzing the differences between yes/no questions with be and yes/no questions with do/does. (The students would, of course, have to do several tasks before moving on to the language focus phase). Language focus **A** Pair work. The following table contains some of the questions you used in Unit 1. Read the questions and then answer the questions below.

Are you married?	Do you speak French?
Is your father in the military?	Does your family live in Ottawa?
Are you from Poland?	Do you come from a large family?
Is he from Mexico?	Does your name have a meaning?
Is she married?	Does she live in Montreal?

B.

1. How are the two sets of questions the same?
2. How they different from each other?
3. Circle the verbs. How are the verbs in column 1 different from the verbs in column 2.

C. Pair work. Change the following statements into questions.

1. You are married.
2. You play football.
3. Your name is John.
4. I am late.
5. Your girlfriend lives in Sherbrooke.
6. Your girlfriend goes to Concordia.

Do you know the rules?

To turn statements with the verb to be into yes/no questions, move am, is, are to _____

To turn statements with action verbs into questions use:

- do with _____
- does with _____

This more intensive approach also allows for a language focus on the contrasting intonation patterns of wh- questions and both kinds of yes/no questions, such as the following.

Pronunciation: Question intonation.

A. Listen to your teacher read the following questions. Which questions end with rising intonation and which ones end with falling intonation? Draw an arow ( ) Over each question to indicate your choice.

1. Where are you from?
2. How old are you?
3. Do you have a nickname?
4. Are you Japanese?
5. What is your last name?
6. Does your name have a meaning?
7. Is Aziza your girlfriend?
8. Do you have any children?

Do you know the rule?

- Wh- questions usually have _____ intonation.
- Yes/No questions usually have _____intonation.

B. Practice asking the questions in part A

These examples illustrate one of the more difficult problems a designer must confront when attempting to rework structural/functional materials to include post-task language focus work - the given units of work do not always include enough related language structures or features that allow for language analysis activities. Therefore, the designer must create a more intensive approach by expanding the given tasks or adding new tasks in order to provide practice of other related target structures.

Conclusion

Despite the advantages of TBLT and its current prominence in the research literature, there are still relatively few genuine task-based textbooks on the market. Teachers who have been assigned a text by their schools may find that they have to adapt the materials if they wish to use a task-based approach. Since TBLT is a new approach requiring a change in methodological focus rather than a new method requiring the wholesale learning of new teaching techniques, a text based on a structural/functional syllabus can provide some activities out of which task-based frameworks can be constructed. While a variety of design changes and changes in how the materials are used will typically be required, the biggest challenge for a designer involves redesigning grammar practice exercises into post-task language analysis activities and coming up with tasks intensive enough to allow for comparative analysis.

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