REVIEW OF TASK-BASED INSTRUCTION

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Abstract
As a new ideology of task-based instruction aims at achieving the balanced development of language, the paper reviews the origin, the development and the future of task-based instruction with the aim of providing a clear picture of tasks and task-based instruction and in the hope of removing doubts and suspicions and pointing out the problems faced by task-based instruction.

Key words
task-based instruction  task  task complexity

Introduction
In the SLA field and FLT, teachers and researchers are devoted to finding a method which functions as a bridge to join the usage and use of the language, the forms and meaning and the process and product. Task-based instruction seems to satisfy such demands for the reason that “It treasures both the learning process and learning results, language forms and meaning, and linguistic competence and communicative function.” (Zhang 1999). Therefore, it has attracted wide attention in the field of SLA become one of the hot spots of current theoretical study and provided some theoretical guidance for the practice of FLT and SLT. In China, the idea of task is not something new, but most of the writings are concerned with the introduction of its theoretical background and its application in the classroom. Gong 2003, Han 2003, Ma 2003, the empirical researches are limited. Chen, Wu 1998, He, Wang 2003, Ma 2004. There are still confusions and doubts about tasks and task-based instruction; therefore, the author believes it is necessary to write a review concerning the origin, the development and the future of task-based instruction.

1. The changes and challenges in SLT and FLT
With the development of psychology science and people expanding insight into the nature of language teaching and learning, FLT has experienced changes and challenges varying in the philosophy of the focus of language teaching, focus on forms, focus on meaning and focus on form. Focus on forms refers to instruction that seeks to isolate linguistic forms in order to teach and test them at a time” (Ellis 1994:39). It is believed that when the linguistic forms have been grasped, learners can “learn” the language which is represented by the grammar-translation method and based on the structural syllabus. While people were disappointed at the results “produced” by the grammar-translation method, the meaning-focused method, represented by communicative approach, was applauded as an efficacious remedy. However, the communicative approach itself has gone through many changes and come to be challenged as neglecting the linguistic forms because this approach gives priority to meaning, which can be achieved by effective use of communicative strategies.

Now it is unanimously agreed that a language can be learnt not only by the balance between a focus on meaning and a focus on forms. Ellis 1994, Long 1991, Nunan 1989, Robinson 2001, Skehan 1998, Spada 1987. Meaning and forms are not opposite, but are complementary. An excessive focus on
meaning runs the risk of learners becoming confined to the strategic solutions they develop without sufficient focus for structural change and accuracy. An excessive focus on forms will not push learners to integrate language structure into effective or coping communication. However, the tension between forms and meaning constantly exists. Therefore, the real issue in the wider context of second language development is how these three goals—fluency, accuracy, and complexity—coexist over more extended periods of time and meaning and forms are balanced in the long run. Given this potential state of affairs, the challenge facing pedagogy is to establish principles which enable instruction to foster balanced development and it is the so-called focus on form ideology which involves alternating in some principled way between a focus on meaning and a focus on forms. Many researchers—Bygate 1998, DeKeyser 1998, Doughty 2001, Ellis 1994, Long 1991, Robinson 2001a, Sharwood 2000, Skehan 1998, 2002, VanPatten 2002, Willis 1998—believe that the task-based instruction is the best way to realize this ideology and they and many others—Skehan, Foster 1997, Iwashita et al. 2001, Mori 2002, Nobuyoshi, Ellis 1993, Waters, Waters 2001—began to use “tasks” to impel the development of the learners underlying language and investigate how tasks manipulate learner cognitive resources and affective factors to allocate attention between meaning and forms.

1. The theoretical background of task-based instruction

Task-based instruction has its psychological origin. It has been believed that the Vygotskian hypothesis of regulation—embodying a developmental sequence both cognitive and linguistic offers a psycholinguistic framework which could help us understand more fully some of the principles underlying task-based approaches to second language teaching. Foley 1991, 32 This view is also held by Platt and Brooks 2002. They believe that task engagement is a turning point in foreign language development based on the idea that learners are developing recognizing humans who can achieve greater control of the target language ZPD ZONE by task. Judging by these sound conclusion can be drawn that the task-based instruction seems to accord with the Vygotskian view of development.

The study of tasks has deep roots in the information processing theory which is based on the following propositions. First, it is assumed that people only have limited attention available during language use. This generally means that in order to attend to one thing people are likely to have to forego attending to something else. Second, here are tensions between different aspects of language use with a certain prominence attached to a concern for fluency and also for formal aspects of language. Principally, accuracy and complexity.

2. The three approaches of task-based instruction

A task is defined by many researchers—Brown, Yule 1983, Candlin 1989, Nunan 1989, Robinson 2001, Skehan 1998—as an activity in which meaning is primary. Here is some communication problem to solve. There is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities. Task completion has some priority. The assessment of the task is in terms of outcome.

The first major influence on the use of tasks in language teaching has come from Long. He has made at least three major contributions to task work. Robinson 2001a. First, he has argued that tasks should be chosen according to learner needs. Second, Long initiated debate to explore why not all tasks are equally effective and to devise research techniques for exploring which tasks are more useful and when. Last but not the least, as a means of distinguishing task quality. Long has argued consistently for tasks which promote negotiation of meaning. The basic approach here is to propose that where tasks generate greater negotiation of meaning conditions are more appropriate for interlanguage development to occur. On the basis of these contributions, Long argues that tasks can be the units for syllabuses and that when chosen and used appropriately, they can be an effective foil for individualized language development. Long, Robinson 1998, Robinson 2001b. Findings in this area are extensive and are relevant to decisions on task-based instruction although the theoretical justifications for such research are rather weak and have been challenged. Iwashita et al. 2001, Skehan, Foster 2001, Waters, Waters 2001.

A second approach to investigating tasks is more embedded within actual language classrooms than research-based. One example of this is represented by the work of Willis 1996. His emphasis is less on sequencing tasks so much as on how tasks can best be used and implemented in the classroom-based...
Willis 1996 [3:2] presents a framework to realize these principles in the classroom. 1] pre-task introduction to topic and task 2] task cycle task planning and report 3] language focus analysis and practice. The first stage provides the chance for the learners' schematic knowledge to be activated and opportunities for a focus on form to be set in motion. The second stage provides the opportunity for language use and the development of fluency accuracy and complexity. So holding out the prospect of interlanguage development. After the two preceding phases, there should be some degree of language focus where a variety of activities can be engaged in.

The approach proposed by Willis provides useful guidance for the implementation of a task-based approach. It does, though, have some drawbacks. First, it does not link effectively with the wider ranging theory about second language acquisition. Second, it is based on experience but not subjected to test or grounded in other research. Therefore, there is little detail regarding aspects of performance which can be focused on the nature of second language performance and the ways in which different pedagogic goals fluency, accuracy, and complexity, can be achieved. As a result of which there is insufficient connection with the nature of interlanguage development. Skehan 1998. This brings some researchers Robinson 2001a Skehan 1998 to a final criticism that there is insufficient detail as to how plans can be made and systematic teaching arranged. In other words, there is little guidance regarding task complexity analysis. On the one hand, or syllabus specification on the other.

Similarly, Samuda 2001 has explored how a teacher can work with students to make form-meaning connections more salient for them. So while they are doing a meaningful focused task, the teacher can skillfully insinuate extending language which the learners can more readily attend to and incorporate in their own speech. Like the Willis approach the first stage is to create a “need to mean.” Then, taking the example of modality Samuda shows how the teacher can induce the learner to go beyond an initial stage where modality can only be expressed through words like “probably” and “maybe” to a later stage where with appropriate and unobtrusive prompting they can incorporate modal verbs to get across the same ideas. Similarly, the implementation of the “frame work” cannot achieve anything if the tasks are put at the mercy of the learners as long as the task problem has not been solved.

A third more cognitive approach to tasks takes a different perspective which depends on the information processing theory. This approach is reflected in the work of Nunan 1989, Brown and Yule 1983, Brindley 1987, Candlin 1987, Skehan 1996, 1998. In Ellis words, Ellis 1994, 1998 there is a new tendency in ESL and EFL—the influence of task complexity on learners’ performance.

However, at beginning there is no such distinction between task complexity and task difficulty. The researchers all use the same term “task difficulty” to refer to internal factors, external factors, motivation and interest, etc., and international factors, communicative stress. The confused terms create troubles in the execution of instruction the design of materials and syllabuses and the interpretation of the experimental results. Therefore, it is necessary to distinguish task complexity and task difficulty.

What Robinson 2001 has done sheds a new light on this. He distinguishes three factors which interact to influence task performance and learning: Task complexity, cognitive factor, task difficulty, external factors, individual difference, and task condition. Interactional factors. Task complexity is represented as resource, directing and resource depleting dimensions, which signify the cognitive demands put on the learner and are design features of tasks and their implementation can be manipulated to increase or lessen the cognitive demand tasks on the learner during task performance.

Task difficulty concerns learners' perceptions of the demands of the task and these are determined by both affective variables such as motivation to complete the task and by ability factors such as aptitude. Task difficulty should therefore help explain variation in task performance between any two learners performing the same task simple or complex whereas task complexity should help explain within learner variation in performance on any two tasks, simple and complex.

Task condition factors concern the nature of the participation required on task whether information goes one way or two ways whether the task solution is closed or open and also on participant variables whether the groups or pairs are same different gender or previously
familiar with each other. Both task difficulty and task condition are unlikely to be a useful basis for priority sequencing decisions and fidelity to the target task performance that the pedagogic tasks are aiming to facilitate.

The distinction between task complexity and task difficulty and task condition is essential for the development of TBI for as a new and creative approach its strength and maturity lies in its theories and research. Having gone through the stage of assumption and initial experiment then the introduction of the framework for its specific execution and gradually clear theories concerning the task itself TBI becomes more and more clear and reliable.

3 The three orientations towards tasks

As for the task itself there are three versions of orientations [structure-oriented tasks] which are also called focused communicative tasks by Ellis 1994 and the communication-oriented tasks and information processing approach to tasks. The first two approaches represent extreme positions because they share the quality that they concentrate on one aspect of language performance at the expense of others. The structure-oriented approach emphasizes forms to the detriment of meaning and "traps" structures through task design called grammar conscious raising task. Convicted in the assumption that formal instruction and communicative language teaching can be integrated through the use of grammar tasks designed to promote communication about grammar the proponents such as Ellis 1999 Loschky Bley-Vroman 1993 cited in Skehan 1998 of this approach are exploring the possibility that teaching activities can be designed which constrain language use in such a way that specific structures will be used However these proposals have been disputed by researchers for the following reasons firstly the tasks do not make meaning primary or have much of a real-world relationship which has distorted the main characteristic of task in which meaning is primary Long 1991 Nunan 1989 Robinson 2001 Skehan 1996 secondly through the work of Willis 1996 and Samuda 2001 that specific structures can be brought into prominence there is no guarantee that they will be the structures which will be internalized thirdly one might wonder at the feasibility of the approach for a wide range of structures beyond those for which inventories have been developed One interesting thing is that Ellis 2001 himself changed his position and admitted As Loschky and Bley-Vroman 1993 have noted focused communicative tasks can be designed so that the production of the target feature is useful natural or essential to the performance of the task Ideally it needs to be essential but this is difficult to achieve because learners cannot use features they have not yet acquired and also are adept at avoiding using those features they find difficult to process.

The contrasting position argues that giving learners tasks to transact will drive forward language development. The tasks themselves will create a need for language change and a means of fulfilling that need. A strong advocate of this approach is Willis. He proposes that tasks which meet what might be termed a "naturalness" condition and which are not conformity-based or display-oriented for any particular structure will lead learners to develop language effectively and he suggests that transacting tasks will in an unforced way generate the most significant lexis of a language and that learners will be able to use such lexis in syntactic patterns He is confident that natural tasks will enable important and frequent lexis to be used and learned A similar conclusion is reached through a different route by Long 1985. He proposes that a task-based approach in which real-world needs become the motivating force for task design will generate interactions which engage acquisition processes and lead to interlanguage development. The tasks will catalyze meaningful language use since opportunities to negotiate meaning and recast productions in a supportive environment can assist structural development in the target language.

The central difficulties with the position advocated by Willis and Long are that ① overemphasizing communication increases the risk of a greater reliance on communication strategies and lexically-based language and that reliance on such devices may move language structure out of focus. The result will be that the focus on meaning will make it less likely that continuing interlanguage growth will occur ② There is no easy means of assuring systematic language development. The view that tasks will enable naturalistic processes to operate provides little scope for choosing tasks to push forward development syntactically and for effective monitoring of progress. To sum up ③ to require focus on particular
structures would be to negate one of the central qualities of a task-based approach. But to be unable to probe whether specific areas of language have been attended to would seem to be a denial of a pedagogic role” (Skehan 1998:125).

In Skehan (1996:1998) words continuing interlanguage growth will not occur if we believe that the task will take care of itself. Task-based learning needs to be implemented in a way that discourages the learner from focusing on forms at the expense of meaning, or meaning at the expense of forms, but encourages instead a focus that shifts between the two. As a result, an intermediate position is proposed by Skehan (1996:1998, 2002) and Robinson (2001). As is just mentioned above, such an approach is based on the information processing theory which states that attentional limitations constrain the capacity of the language learner to focus on a number of different areas simultaneously. Different aspects of language performance, particularly accuracy, fluency, and complexity, enter into competition with one another. Skehan (Foster 2001) To achieve the goal of focus on form and the balanced development of fluency, accuracy, and complexity, it is important that tasks are chosen which are of the appropriate level of difficulty. In focused in their aims between fluency and complexity, and have some basis in task-based research.

4 The main challenge faced by task-based instruction

The above discussion demonstrates that “Task-based teaching has not yet fully established itself” (Careless 2002:390). The task-based approach to instruction is currently in a transitional position, Skehan (1996). The main factor affecting performance is the task is the choice of the task itself. Task based approaches need to focus on task difficulty as a precondition for any task work. Skehan (1998:134) Tasks should not be so “difficult” that excessive mental processing is required simply to communicate any sort of meaning. If they do, it may produce a reliance on ellipsis, context, strategies, and lexicalization. Bygate (1998) The result is that learners prioritize fluency, accuracy is seen as less important, or at least less feasible. Ellis (1994) Skehan (1996) Robinson 2001a,b,c,d which reduces the pedagogic value of a task-based instruction. Nor should tasks be so easy that learners are bored and do not engage seriously with the task requirements. With the result that no gain is made in terms of restructuring accuracy or fluency in any way. Just as Skehan (1996:48) proposes “Giving learners communication problems to solve at the right level of processing’ difficulty’ avoiding excessive processing demands which would disrupt performance, while also avoiding non-challenging tasks do not extend ability for use. In this way, learners are more able to bring to the effects of recent restructuring, but at the same time achieve a level of fluency.” Therefore, the controversial topic in task-based instruction is undoubtedly the question of task sequencing” (Alvarez & Torres 2003:456).

As Robinson (2001b:317) pointed out More studies of the effects of each of these dimensions of task complexity on measures of learner production need to be proposed and motivated which would contribute much to establishing an empirical basis for decisions about grading and sequencing tasks as well as to our understanding of the effects of task-based instruction on L2 development.

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