



## **The Task-based Approach in Language Teaching**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The Task-Based Approach (TBA) has gained popularity in the field of language teaching since the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and significant scholars have joined the discussion and increased the amount of analytical studies on the issue. Nevertheless experimental research is poor, and the tendency of some of the scholars is nowadays **shifting** towards a more tempered and **moderate** stand on their claims. Reasons for that are various: the difficulty in the implementation of the method in the classroom, the difficulty in elaborating materials following the TBA and the scarcity of task-based manuals count as important and perhaps decisive arguments. But there are also theoretical implications in the TBA which do not seem to be fully convincing or may lack sound foundations. In this paper I will attempt to describe the TBA **critically**, pointing out what I consider positive in this approach, and underlining the inadequacy of some assumptions and conclusions. The design of a new TBA model is not the goal of this study. But the conclusions suggest that tasks may contribute to the production of a more refined and complete foreign language syllabus, helping to **motivate** the students and focus the attention of teachers and learners on meaning and communicative language use.

### **KEYWORDS**

Language teaching, methods, methodology, communicative methodology, tasks, task based approach, process approach, language learning.

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Changes and shifts in language teaching have been present throughout the history of this discipline. At the basis of this apparently unending uncertainty about the efficiency of methods at specific historical moments there is also a permanent search and striving to find better ways of teaching and learning languages, which implies acknowledging dissatisfaction with ongoing methods and procedures. In the second half of the 20th century those changes in methodology were more frequent and pressing for teachers and learners. The need for communication among people of different cultures and languages, triggered by travelling and globalisation, puts pressure on people to learn languages more quickly and efficiently. Learning a new system of communication is also substantially different from what it used to be in previous centuries: we have more need to communicate orally (not only in writing and reading) and we cannot wait for years before we engage in real communication. This urgency to learn languages is felt everywhere within society all over the world. The search for new and more efficient methods is a consequence of our social organization and the requirements for fluid communication.

Methodological changes follow each other within short periods of time. Even though the majority of educational innovations end in failure (Adams, R. and Chen D., 1981) positive effects can be expected from most of them. But it is true that new methods do not appear all of a sudden or disconnected from the world into which they are born. They overlap for some time with current methodological practices. This 'incubation' period is a real test for new ideas: some of them pass the test, others do not. Many discussions, arguments and counterarguments are exhibited in the process. But sometimes what was considered a decisive gain against existing practices at a given moment, proved to be wrong a few years later, and a new theory or method replaced it in its turn. Once more? Where will the end lie, if there is to be one? The methods which prevail are usually those that are best suited to the challenges, demands and needs of the time.

In other writings (Sánchez 1992; 1997) I have outlined two main trends in language teaching methodology: the 'grammatical' and the 'conversational' approach. Both approaches have been permanently in tension with each other and are representative of a dichotomy that seems to reappear again and again in different ways and formats: written vs. oral language; learning grammar vs. learning how to speak; and formal vs. informal language use. In the last part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century the dichotomy focus on form vs. focus on content, teaching and learning language for accuracy vs. teaching and learning language for meaning developed as the new paradigm. Emphasis on one or the other end of the scale tends to be cyclical, so that if form, structure and accuracy prevailed in the sixties and seventies, meaning and communicative potential gained momentum in the eighties and afterwards.

The Task Based Approach (TBA) must be placed within this context, at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. It is not an isolated or 'unique' methodological event. TBA can only be fully understood if you contrast it with preceding methods and analyse it within mainstream communicative methodology. Some background information will therefore be needed, and that

is the goal in the first section of this paper. A detailed discussion will follow on what a task is and on the various definitions proposed. This will lay the ground for a 'balanced criticism' of the TBA and will allow the reader to draw some positive and realistic conclusions on the issue.

## BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE BEHIND THE TBA IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

The emergence of the TBA is connected to what became known as the 'Bangalore Project' (Prabhu 1987) initiated in 1979 and completed in 1984. The word 'task' is often used here to refer to the special kind of activities carried on in the classroom. Such activities are characterised, among other features, by the emphasis put on meaning and the importance assigned to the process of doing things (how) vs. the prevailing role given to content (*what*) in the teaching practice of that decade. The purpose of the project is to investigate new ways of teaching which sprang from

a strongly felt pedagogic intuition, arising from experience generally but made concrete in the course of professional debate in India. This was that the development of competence in second language requires no systematisation of language inputs or maximization of planned practice, but rather the creation of conditions in which learners engage in an effort to cope with communication.

*Prabhu (1987:1)*

The project aimed at improving the SOS ('situational oral approach') and the emphasis lay on competence and communication. Prabhu stated explicitly that competence is to be understood as 'grammatical competence' ('the ability to conform automatically to grammatical norms') and communication as 'a matter of understanding or conveying meaning'. Communicative competence was to develop 'in the course of meaning-focused activity'. It should also be borne in mind that grammatical competence was to be built through 'internal self-regulating processes' and for that it would help to convey meaning in 'favourable conditions'. The most important responsibility of the teachers was to create the conditions for the learners to engage in meaningful situations. Any prior regulation of what had to be learnt according to a predefined formal or grammatical syllabus was to be excluded.

Emphasis on meaning and authenticity of communication appeal to many teachers and learners of languages. After all, we use language for transmitting messages, which is content, and association of meaning and language is perceived as close to reality. The problem is that the transmission of meaning cannot be separated from the formal 'vehicle' through which it is conveyed. The role of each one of those elements in communication and their mutual relationships are at the root of a problem that has never been fully solved.

Most methods are heavily rooted in linguistic theories, theories of learning or theoretical assumptions on the nature of linguistic communication. It would be unfair to study the

communicative approach without linking it to such names as Vygotsky (1962; 1978), Austin (1962) or Halliday (1973; 1978), or Krashen (1983), among others.

Vygotsky thinks of language as a social event, a shared social activity through which individuals develop their personality within a community. In his view, language is not the result of 'isolated' learning; it requires a social basis. And linguistic ability is built inside our mind to communicate with the **outside** world. Children enhance their own personality as 'different' human beings precisely through contrast and interaction with their environment, and particularly with other human beings around them. In fact, Vygotsky considers that thought, as **separate** from language, takes root when interaction gives way to or turns into monologue. Through monologues **children** communicate with themselves, and they do that with words or sentences that might be difficult or impossible for others to understand. While this 'inner speech' consolidates and strengthens linguistic thought, communicative interaction allows for the consolidation of the social dimension of the 'speakers' as human beings. This social perspective should never be absent in the learning process of languages. The conclusion, then, should be that when we **learn** languages other than the native one, the social dimension can only be reached through interaction and interpersonal relations with others.

Vygotskian assumptions lead to conclude that interaction belongs to the very nature of language, **because** language is socially based. From this perspective, content is important, but interaction is **still** more important: you cannot reach **true** linguistic achievements if opportunities for interaction are not present. It is obvious that the kind of interaction needed must be 'meaningful' and relevant. What **else** can be expected from interaction with others? One might raise the problem of how the learner **will** manage to integrate and assimilate **knowledge** coming from **outside**. And the answer to that is that nature **provides** the learner with the necessary capacity and resources, as needed. You may further raise the issue of how different **it** is learning an L1 and an L2. Within the Vygotskian perspective, however, both processes of learning share the same **object** (language) and some basic conditions of learning (shaping **reality** through language, establishing connections **to the outside** world), and it is only to be expected that **some** pedagogical 'therapy' has to be **applied**. Language **learnt** (both L1 and L2), on the other hand, serves the same purpose for the learner: **it makes** communication possible.

The *functional* nature of language is highlighted by Firthian and Hallidayan linguistics. And it is through the work of Wilkins (1976) that this functional dimension is incorporated into methodological issues on language teaching. Wilkins does it by contrasting synthetic and analytic syllabuses. He describes synthetic language teaching as a strategy

**in which the different parts of the language are taught separately and step-by-step so that acquisition is a process of gradual accumulation of the parts until the whole structure of the language has been built up.**

*Wilkins (1976:2)*

This strategy requires that the language be 'broken down' into its parts —i.e. structures

and lexical items—, that these parts be ordered following specific criteria and that they be presented to the learner. **Samples** brought into the classroom will be necessarily limited and at least partially disconnected from the whole, which makes the task of the learner still more difficult when attempting to put **all** the elements together in order to build meaningful ‘**chunks**’ of language.

**Analytic** approaches do not emphasize such a tight control of elements learnt or learning itself. In Wilkins’ words,

In analytic approaches there is no attempt at this **careful** linguistic control of the learning environment. Components of language are not **seen** as building blocks which **have** to be progressively accumulated. [...] In general, structural considerations are secondary when decisions are being taken **about** the way in which the language to which the learner will be exposed is to be selected and organized.

*Wilkins (1976:2)*

And he adds later:

The prior analysis of the total language system into a set of discrete pieces of language that is a necessary precondition for the adoption of a synthetic approach is **largely superfluous** in an analytic approach. [...] They are organized in terms of the purposes for which people are learning language and the kinds of language performance that are necessary to meet these purposes. [...] The units [...] are not primarily **labelled** in grammatical terms.

*Wilkins (1976:13)*

Wilkins advocates notional and functional syllabuses, which are analytic in nature —he says— and, in doing so, he moves significantly away from **current** teaching practices, based on audiolingual methodology and attached to the learning of linguistic forms. It may be questioned whether his ‘notional-functional’ syllabus is **fully** analytical, as he **claims**, since it requires a previous analysis of language, decomposing it into notions, functions and other smaller linguistic units, which learners must **later** put together into larger situations or notions. Notional syllabuses are still ‘elaborated syllabuses’ and derive from a previous analysis of the language. The result of this analysis is then ordered according to particular rules or principles, and this is the final product that must be taught and learnt. Selection of the content is **controlled** by principles other than grammatical or structural ones, but there is a content organized in ‘pieces’ of language of different kinds, stratified at different levels, **some** of them, it is true, of a semantic nature (meaning). From that point of view Wilkins’ notional-functional syllabus is more synthetic than analytical, as Long and Crookes (1985; 1992) claim. But it is only **fair** to admit that Wilkins paved the way towards an approach focused on functions and notions, and hence, on meaning.

The situation is less satisfactory if we approach the teaching scene from a ‘communicative’ perspective. In this view, it is said that in the process of language acquisition the role of the learner is central and decisive. ‘Acquisition’ —as opposed to ‘learning’, following

Krashen (Krashen, 1985)— is the true goal in language learning, but it takes place only if knowledge (language) is integrated by the individual into his own set of values and idiosyncrasy and if a linguistic system is built. 'Leaming' alone (Krashen, 1985) is not enough. The principle taken for granted in synthetic approaches, 'what is taught = what is (or ought to be) learnt' (Prabhu 1984:273) cannot be accepted any more, since it comes from outside (external syllabus) or is imposed on the learner (by the teacher). Under those circumstances, 'acquisition' will be hindered, or at least not favoured. This is a job that only the learner can do; he must be 'invited' to collaborate in this purpose, assuring this goal by himself. As Long and Crookes (1985:34) put it, 'language learning is more a psycholinguistic than a linguistic process'.

### LANGUAGE LEARNING AS A PROCESS

Prabhu and others initiated the Bangalore Project in 1979. At that time Prabhu affirmed:

Communicative teaching in most Western thinking has been *training for* communication, which I claim involves one in some way or other in the preselection; it is a kind of matching of notion and form. Whereas the Bangalore Project is teaching *through* communication; therefore the very notion of communication is different.

*Prabhu (1980:164)*

Prabhu's claim is revolutionary regarding synthetic or notional-functional approaches: you do not provide the learners with previously organized language materials to learn; you do not pretend to achieve specific communicative goals through activities previously designed and sequenced, but rather expect the learners to learn through the activities they engage in while using the language to carry out the task proposed. The process of communication itself is the *means* for learning to communicate. Acquisition of the formal system of language will take some time, but will be reached 'subconsciously' through the activation of an internal system of rules and principles by the learner. The condition to be met is that communicative practice must be carried out in a meaningful way (Krashen 1982).

There is therefore no syllabus in terms of vocabulary or structure, no pre-selection of language items for any given lesson or activity and no stage in the lesson when language items are practised or sentence production as such is demanded. The basis of each lesson is a problem solving or a task.

*Prabhu (1984: 275-6)*

Formal approaches define in advance what the learners must learn. The syllabus is regulated from outside. In a process approach assumptions are very different: learners regulate the process of learning by themselves, autonomously. And this self-regulating activity results in language acquisition, as it happens in a natural environment (learning of the mother tongue). Process approaches do not separate the object *of learning* from the process *of learning*. To do

that when learning a second language would involve depriving the learners of applying their previous experiences in language learning. That is rather the case of methods based on formal systems, in which new models (object-regulated input) are offered, while interactive activities are absent or adjust to formal patterns and become structurally conditioned. In order not to divorce the object and the process of learning, Prabhu (1987) expresses the need for 'enabling' procedures, that is operational ways and practices to reinforce the potential of learners not only to fulfil specific communicative needs in carrying out a task, but also communicative needs in the future when implementing different tasks. Working with tasks should allow learners to cope with unpredictable communicative situations. In fact, fulfilling a task should necessarily bring with it the development of the learner's cognitive abilities: this will automatically derive from the solution of the logical problems implied by the sequence of events inherent to tasks. When learning a foreign language, the means to perform the task is precisely the target language. The object and the process of learning converge in one single event, which is 'holistic' in nature: the process of (interactive) communication, the use of the suitable communicative elements in a genuine communicative situation and the strengthening of the cognitive abilities of the intervening individuals all come together in a unique communicative episode. In terms of syllabus design, tasks are fully inserted within a process syllabus, but they cannot get rid of discrete linguistic elements. How to solve the tension involved in bringing together and integrating both components is the main challenge of a task-based approach.

When performing a task in the real world, language is automatically limited: structures and words to be used will be restricted to the semantic field covered by the task. And so they are as well the logical steps underlying the fulfilment of the task. Gouin's (1892) 'series method' and the 'logic of nature' can be called upon here to illustrate the situation. The logic of 'cause and effect' (any cause produces a specific effect and any effect is the result of a specific cause) pushes the task forward in a way that the learner can automatically and unconsciously detect. On the basis of this understanding of the ongoing process, the learner will be able to understand the language being used and carry out the task, occasionally with the help of his peers or the teacher (the 'outside world'), finding the right words for the right things or ideas.

Breen (1987a) concludes that the TBA is a result of

- i) New views on language.
- ii) New views on teaching methodology.
- iii) New views on the contribution of the learners to the learning process.
- iv) New views on how to plan teaching and learning.

Points iii) and iv) deserve some comments. The role of the learner has been systematically left aside for centuries. And that has not only been the case in language teaching, but in all educational fields. Traditional education centred on the transmission of content, well defined and laid down by teachers or by the authorities. Not much else was added or considered

regarding other elements **also** present in the teaching and learning situation. Research in language acquisition, among other reasons, has recently demonstrated what nowadays seems obvious: the most important element in the teaching-learning situation is the learner. The analysis of learning itself reveals relevant facts. Allwright (1984) concludes that learners do not necessarily learn what teachers teach, while sometimes they learn what teachers **have** not taught. And that is so in spite of admitting that **class** attendance has an effect on learning (Long 1983). What do learners do in the process of learning? And how do they do it? Answering those questions requires an **in** depth analysis of the participation of the learner in the process of learning. Research **is** still incomplete in this area, but it seems that individual and inherent capabilities of the learners prevail over **external** factors (say teacher, materials, syllabus) (Ellis 1985). Learners, consciously or not, systematically **follow** their own patterns of learning and manage to reprocess the input 'in their own way'. Efficiency in teaching demands a careful **re**-evaluation of the **learner's** role in the classroom.

Regarding point iv., new theories, methods or ideas on teaching abound. This is only natural if we take into account the exclusive **prominence** of teachers in the past. But if learners **enter** the scene, the process of learning must **also** be the **subject** of a more careful attention and analysis. Experience reveals that a careful definition of the syllabus **does** not result in the learning of such a syllabus. In other words, the syllabus taught is not necessarily equal to the syllabus learnt. The elaboration of syllabuses is no longer the work of amateurs. On the contrary, specialists in syllabus design are responsible for **defining** and refining syllabuses in the school system, which is no doubt a guarantee of their quality and adequacy. But apparently this is not enough to reach a satisfactory **level** in **efficiency**. Something must be there that hinders the achievement of the intended results in the teaching-learning situation. Perhaps the 'learning dimension' should **also** be included in the definition of a syllabus, which would imply that formal teaching should no longer be the prevailing criterion conditioning syllabus design. Syllabus complexity is **well** illustrated in the literature of language teaching (see Dubin and Olshtein 1986, among others); what **is** taught (content) should perhaps be integrated with the way the content is taught (procedure). The way content and method, content and procedures are approached needs reconsideration.

If the way we teach has an effect on learning, process syllabuses **have** a role to play in language teaching. Contrary to the 'propositional syllabuses' (based on the definition of structures, rules and vocabulary to learn), 'process syllabuses' face the teaching situation from the opposite **side**: they focus not on what has to be taught, but on how things are done or how goals are achieved. Goals to be achieved are still there, but the means and **skills** to reach them are given priority in the analysis of the situation. It is assumed that if we **perform** the task adequately, the goals will be achieved more efficiently.



## WHAT IS A TASK?

Theory and practice around TBA are far from being **uniform** and clear. A review of the literature on the topic reveals that governing **principles** are **loose** and not everybody shares the same defining criteria. The TBA has **also been applied** in different ways in the classroom. Breen (1987:157) advocates a difference between task-based syllabuses and process syllabuses, although he acknowledges roots common to both of them, which are named 'processplans'. That is, task-based syllabuses are 'process based'. Does the concept of task imply more emphasis on the process of doing things than on the goal it aims at? Processes and goals both belong to the nature of tasks. Why not focus on goals more than on processes, or on goals as much as on processes? Are goals less important than the way we achieve them? Traditional methodology and school practice **have prioritised goals** in general and a similar point of view is to be detected in many other **areas** of human action. This appears not to be the case in the TBA.

Long and Crookes (1992:27) **affirm** that 'three new, task-based syllabus types appeared in the 1980s: (a) the procedural syllabus, (b) the process syllabus, and (c) the task-syllabus', adding **later** on that '**all three reject linguistic elements as the unit of analysis and opt instead for some conception of *task***'. Following this statement, tasks are to be considered essential to the three of them and constitute a common denominator, not **just** a distinctive element of the task-based syllabus vs. the other two syllabus types. This view is not easy to match with other views, in which, for example, task-based syllabuses are **seen** as different from process-syllabuses, while both are rooted in 'process plans' (See Breen 1987a; 1987b). Do differences derive from the underlying concept of task?

Tasks, in fact, **have been defined** in different ways. Prabhu **proposes** the following definition:

**An activity which required learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allowed teachers to control and regulate that process, was regarded as a 'task'.**

*Prabhu (1987:24)*

The nature of *task* is depicted in quite general traits. Two important **features** are however mentioned, tightly connected to what was going on in the **project**: task completion (an **outcome** at the end of the activity) and a process 'of thought' while doing the activity. The activity itself, curiously enough, 'allowed teachers to control and regulate the process' (Where is the autonomy of the learner in building his own path of learning?).

Long (1985) defines tasks looking at what people usually do in real life:

**A piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward. Thus, examples of tasks include painting a fence, dressing a child, filling out a form, buying a pair of shoes, making an airline reservation, borrowing a library book, taking a driving test, typing a letter, weighing a patient, sorting letters, taking a hotel reservation, writing a check, finding a street**

destination and helping someone across a road. In other words, by 'task' is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play, and in between. Tasks are the things people will tell you they do if you ask them and they are not applied linguists.

*Long (1985:89)*

The definition matches the semantic expectations of normal speakers when using the word 'task' in daily life ('A piece of work assigned to or demanded of a person', in *Webster's dictionary*. 'A piece of work to be done or undertaken', in *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*). But such a view of the nature of tasks in real life still needs an adaptation to the classroom situation. 'Painting a fence, buying a pair of shoes' or thousands of other similar daily tasks are not likely to be 'naturally' performed in the classroom; some of them — extremely important for communication — cannot even be dramatized in the classroom environment. Long and Crookes (1992) keep to that definition to support their proposal for task-based syllabuses and they apparently also accept the one given by Crookes (1986:1) ('a piece of work or an activity, usually with a specified objective, undertaken as part of an educational course, or at work'). These definitions are, however, significantly different: Crookes' definition derives from a classroom perspective and allows for a pedagogical function and manipulation ('specified objective', 'part of an educational course'), while Long's definition is rooted in real world tasks. While Long's definition runs parallel to his claim for a 'needs identification of learners' tasks', the one by Crookes seems to be more dependent on course requirements or possibilities. At the end of their analysis, both propose a set of 'pedagogic tasks' as the basis for a task-based syllabus. Their views and statements lead us to conclude that Long's 'real world tasks' must be filtered and selected depending on what the classroom situation admits, adding to it an ingredient that must be carefully administered: formal communicative elements necessary for task completion (basically linguistic forms).

Candlin formulates his own definition from a 'pedagogic and operational' point of view:

One of a set of differentiated, sequenceable, problem-posing activities involving learners and teachers in some joint selection from a range of varied cognitive and communicative procedures applied to existing and new knowledge in the collective exploration and pursuance of foreseen or emergent goals within a social milieu.

*Candlin (1987:10)*

He specifies that a task involves a set of activities ('one of a set... sequenceable...'), that they imply a problem which must be solved, that interaction of various kinds must be activated and that a goal will be pursued and can be achieved deploying cognitive and communicative procedures, either taking advantage of already existing knowledge or creating new knowledge if necessary to achieve the completion of the task. The task is to be performed within a 'social milieu'. Candlin's definition also clearly refers to tasks to be performed in the classroom, preferably of a communicative nature. Procedures and goals are mentioned as two of the ingredients of a task, although the nature of 'goals' has to be understood as a 'completion' of the

task, which might be of a non-linguistic character (say, solving a mathematical problem). On that basis it is to be assumed that the language used for carrying out the task has to be considered as instrumental. Learners will gain in their linguistic skills through the language practice needed to perform the task, reactivating their own linguistic resources or searching for new ones when the knowledge available is insufficient. Emphasis, as in the case of Prabhu, is put on the process required to reach a specific goal and the meaningful nature of the resources applied to that goal. Nunan offers a definition focused more on the language classroom:

**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.**

*Nunan (1989:10)*

Such a definition synthesizes some of the most prominent features highlighted by other authors. As Nunan himself remarks, with the exception of one element not mentioned here: tasks are not necessarily 'goal-driven or goal-oriented'. In that case, his conception of tasks is hardly to be put alongside real world tasks, where pursuing a goal is an essential feature.

For J. Willis a task is an activity

**where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome.**

*J. Willis (1996:23)*

With this definition Willis achieves the maximum of simplicity, but does not help to clarify the issue: in this view a task may be any of the communicative activities, of various kinds, available in textbooks and often practised in the classroom.

Skehan writes that a task is

- an activity in which:**
- **meaning is primary**
  - **there is a problem to solve**
  - **the performance is outcome evaluated**
  - **there is a real world relationship**

*Skehan (2001: 12-13)*

Skehan highlights four key features, which are fully within the main stream in the literature around this issue.

The variety of definitions surrounding the concept 'task' reveals a significant number of different points of view. It also appears that one of the reasons for the differences is that scholars do not approach the topic from the point of view of the nature of the task itself in real life, but rather from specific methodological preconceptions, which act as filters to the further description

or definition of the object of study; thus, they end up with different results.

Tasks in real life and pedagogical tasks in the classroom are not to be fully equated. Tasks performed in the real world are not necessarily transferable to the teaching situation, among other things, because classrooms do not offer the same situational environment as the 'real world' does. When applied to the classroom we are not interested, for example, in tasks that do not require written or oral linguistic communication (for example, a mathematical operation alone), or in tasks unsuitable for the classroom (for example, brushing the floor). Those same activities might be thought useful for other educational or learning purposes (developing cognitive or logical abilities), or for feeling comfortable at home, etc. But the tasks language teachers are interested in are of a particular kind. It seems necessary, therefore, to identify the essential features of real and pedagogical tasks.

A second area in which more transparency is needed refers to the dual conceptual pair 'content-method' (what - how). Assigning clear frontiers to both concepts is an old problem. The content to be taught and the way it is brought into and taught in the classroom cannot be neatly separated: both interact with each other and are mutually dependent. In contrast to what some authors maintain (Kumaravadivelu 1993:72f), methods carry the teaching of content in concord with the techniques previously defined, and viceversa; one cannot easily imagine the content of an audiolingual method together with the habitual communicative techniques and activities of a communicative or grammar-translation method; or Direct Methodists conducting the class together with the teaching of structural patterns. Mutual relationships and dependency, however, do not preclude a minimum of autonomy, which allows for substantial differences. Methods in general, as they have been formulated by their authors or consolidated by tradition and practice, tend to emphasize one component or the other: content (*what to teach*) or method (how to teach). Grammar-Translation or audiolingual methodologies can be defined as content-driven, while the Direct Method or the Communicative Approach emphasize the role of method (techniques, procedures). TBA, basically within the communicative mainstream, shares this view: it matters more how to do things in the classroom, while the *what* to teach (prior definition of a syllabus) plays a less salient role. For some defenders of TBA the definition of a syllabus from outside must even be excluded: the learning group should be responsible for their own syllabus. In fact the linguistic elements to be taught will be defined by the task selected and should be subordinated to it. Interaction, the negotiation of meaning, the building of a personal learning path, the importance of meaning versus linguistic form become the skeleton of TBA, where the 'linear' addition of linguistic materials to be learnt, typical of content-based methodologies, gives way to materials relevant for communication (based on the communicative needs of the learners 'loosely' organized —if at all. Acquisition will take place by practising with those materials in activities that simulate real life situations and contexts. It is also believed that learners are naturally endowed with the necessary capability and abilities to learn by working with activities focused on meaning; here it seems that there are too many ingredients that are difficult to constrain and handle coherently within a single teaching-learning approach.

## REAL WORLD TASKS AND CLASSROOM TASKS

Tasks in everyday life are to be found everywhere. Tasks surround us from early in the morning till late at night. Washing our face is a task, as is preparing breakfast, going to work by car, preparing a lesson, buying the newspaper, etc. Tasks pervade our lives, so much so that there is hardly an activity that cannot be called a task. When applied linguists and methodologists began using that word, they obviously relied in one way or another on the basic meaning it had in usual, plain speech. It is obvious that applied linguists were taking advantage of the semantic field covered by 'task', but at the same time they—consciously or not—used the word restricting and adapting its meaning to concepts common to the field of language teaching/learning. The 'restricted' (pedagogical) or 'unrestricted' (real world) semantic content assigned to 'tasks' often leads to some confusion and misunderstandings. Regarding the features of real world tasks, the following set is suggested:

- i) They are goal-oriented or goal-guided activities. Performance is evaluated depending on the achievement or not of the goal.
- ii) They consist most of the time of a sequence of steps, well differentiated but tightly connected among themselves, mutually conditioned by the logical sequence of the actions preceding and following each one of the steps. Failure to fulfil one of the steps can invalidate the outcome of the task.
- iii) The process and procedures applied in the fulfilment of the task *condition* the effective and efficient achievement of the final goal, which is what really matters when we engage in a task. But procedures per se *do not necessarily invalidate* the attainment of the final goal.
- iv) Tools needed and procedures applied vary depending on the goals we aim at.
- v) The goal to be reached might be a problem to solve, but not necessarily.
- vi) While performing the task, efficiency is closely connected to the level of attention devoted to it. Human beings, however, work with limited processing systems, so that if we concentrate on a specific area or topic, another one will probably be totally or partially abandoned.
- vii) Tasks in real life are fully holistic: in their realization the whole person is involved: mind and body, thought and action must be coordinated and work together. When coordination and cooperation is deficient, efficiency in task performance declines.

Do those features apply to pedagogic tasks?

Most authors on task-based methodology emphasize the dichotomy *meaning vs. form* (Breen (1984; 1987), Candlin (1984; 1987), Prabhu (1984; 1987), Long (1991) Ellis (2003), Skehan (1986; 1998 etc.). Such a dichotomy is specific to tasks when they are used in the classroom for teaching languages. In the case of real world tasks (making the bed, mending a

skirt, etc.) such a dichotomy does not necessarily apply, but dichotomies of a different nature can be found instead. It has also often been mentioned that learning in a natural environment centres on meaning more than on form. Nowadays this is a distinctive label in modern second language acquisition research, although emphasis on content and meaning was already promoted and practiced by Gouin's method, by the Direct Methodists and by most defenders of 'conversational approaches' (Sánchez 1997). Recent and specific research on the issue (Van Patten 1990, 1996) further confirms the importance of meaning-guided activities.

Both components are important in language learning. Meaning is 'contained in' and 'conditioned by' the form in which it is inserted. Form alone is useless for communication if meaning is not attached to it. How to keep both of them active when learning is a real challenge for the limited capacity of human beings. Some advocates of task-based and process approaches insist on the primary role of meaning, while emphasis on form is left aside. Experience of learning in the classroom goes often against that claim, as teachers and students feel the need for more formal teaching and learning. There seems to be a gap in the analysis of the problem. On the one hand, emphasis on meaning is said to be necessary for more efficient learning. On the other hand, in learning second languages, emphasizing meaning and leaving form aside does not work properly. Moreover, whether consciously or unconsciously, many learners do not accept this method and re-establish a focus on form in some way. Parallel to that, the importance of process in task performance is also emphasized, while formal linguistic goals move to a secondary place. This introduces a new problem: if reaching the final stage or goal is what really matters in performing a task, the process should be secondary and subordinate to this final goal, since it defines the path towards the goal, but its 'raison d'être' lies in the goal it serves. From that perspective, a process 'per se' is meaningless unless it is associated and subservient to the goals it pursues.

A TBA takes real world tasks as the source and model for pedagogical action. The question must then be posed: In which way can real world tasks 'enter' the classroom and be adapted to it?

To begin with, not all real world tasks are eligible for pedagogical purposes, as said above. Tasks useful for language learning are those that require or favour communication through language. The social dimension of tasks to which many authors refer finds its roots and rationale here. Language learning tasks are useless for communicative purposes if they do not engage learners in communication. And as pointed out above, it is obvious that not all real world tasks involve this social dimension ('real world relationship', as Skehan (2001:13) puts it).

Tasks are also goal-oriented. Goals belong to the nature of the task itself. In fact they are the ultimate trigger that moves the student to engage in a task. In pedagogical tasks, however, we deviate from the primary goals of real world tasks and add new ones: language use in performing the task is a requirement. 'Buying a ticket' for travelling to New York implies that all the stages in the development of the task will be oriented to 'buying the ticket', and not to other purposes. Anything that interferes with the pursuit of this goal will be an obstacle and bring

a lower degree of efficiency into the action. When this task is brought into the classroom and turned into a 'pedagogical task', an important change takes place. Students may devote some time to finding unknown words in a dictionary; they may ask the students for some syntactical problem; they may repeat the same word or sentence several times before they find the correct way of eliciting it; they may waste several minutes in understanding a message, etc. Nobody in the classroom context is really worried about the positive outcome of the task —buying a ticket— but about something else: building correct discourse, finding the right words and registers to ask for a price or a place. The 'linguistic dimension' of the task is what really matters in the classroom. The primary goal of the task has therefore shifted from its original real world value to another one centred on language (not on tickets). The pedagogical task takes a real world task as a pretext for achieving different goals. There is a close relationship between real world tasks and pedagogical tasks based on them, but their primary goals are different.

Actions for carrying out a task are subordinate to the goal defining the task. At the same time, procedures underlying the actions and the process as a whole must be designed with efficiency-guided criteria. The conclusion is, then, that if goals change, the actions to be taken will most likely have to change as well. This is the case of real world tasks versus pedagogical tasks. Changes in the nature of primary goals, as found in pedagogical tasks, require changes in the strategies and actions for attaining those goals as found in real world tasks.

The current literature of TBA does not seem to pay enough attention to this fact (see Ellis 2003, however). Features typical of real world tasks are automatically assigned to and required from classroom tasks, disregarding decisive differences between them. This will result into a mismatch, with undesirable consequences for language learning.

Those are some of the most salient and contrasting differences:

i) Real world tasks emphasize the use of the right strategies and rely on choosing the right actions to achieve the desired goal. The nature of those strategies and actions is not necessarily linguistic. Moreover, language use may not be necessary at all for performing some tasks. However, second language learning classrooms are obviously centred on tasks that involve the use of language. And this is not the only difference to be noticed. Not all tasks requiring the use of language aim at language as the most important goal to be reached. Most often the use of language is a means to an end, but not the end itself. In those cases language use is of a merely instrumental character. Real world tasks consist therefore of operations with a goal in mind, but these operations are not necessarily of a *linguistic nature*; performance requires attention and skills, but not necessarily *linguistic skills*; they require a focus on what is being done, but not necessarily a focus on *linguistic meaning*. The tasks language teachers refer to are tasks of a specific kind and nature and they must be studied and analysed under this perspective.

ii) Sequencing of activities *does* matter in language teaching (Sanchez, 2001). The right outcome of a task depends largely on how the various steps aiming to the final goal follow each other. Sequencing also plays an important role in understanding the process. As the cause-effect sequence proclaimed by Gouin (1892) is supposed to be self-explanatory, the goal which tasks

aim at guides and conveys meaning to the whole, and more specifically to the steps that pave the way to such a goal. This is an advantage: they **help** students to understand what is going on in the process without explicitly being told about it. It is the natural capacity of human beings to interpret reality 'following the logic of nature and natural events' that makes it possible to infer the meaning. The problem we may find in pedagogical tasks is that the natural sequence of the operations of real world tasks has often to be adapted to the classroom situation, in which case the original order of events is distorted. The usual sequence of events expected when performing the task ('intra-task operations') of 'buying a ticket' in real life and when 'buying a ticket' in the classroom, as a **class activity**, **illustrates** the differences we may find. Tasks as carried out in the classroom tend to **deviate** from real world tasks; in doing so, the 'natural sequence of events' changes into a 'pedagogically conditioned sequence of events' fully dependent on linguistic needs and skills. The potential of natural sequencing for **inferring** meaning will **hardly** work in those circumstances.

Experimental research on the patterns learners adjust to in their learning process is far from being conclusive. The P-P-P model (Presentation-Practice-Production) is usually considered to be the most frequent in the classroom. If that is so, we should bear in mind that task completion may **follow** a different scheme. Can we expect **learners** to adapt 'automatically' to a novel and constantly changing sequential pattern in the activities they engage in —as real tasks most often require? If that is not the case, we would be setting the conditions for a conflict in language learning. Avoiding such a conflict requires that tasks developed in the classroom take into account the sequence of the steps leading to the final **outcome** and how **well** they fit the learning sequence the students are used to.

**iii)** A third **feature** highlighted in the literature on TBA refers to interaction. Tasks, it is said, favour or require communicative interaction among people. Again, this assumption refers to classroom tasks, not to any task. Tasks in real life do not always involve interaction with others, as we **all** know. It is true, however, that only tasks that involve linguistic interaction are useful for language teaching and learning. But then it would be wrong to transfer **features** typical of pedagogical tasks to tasks in general. TBA must count on important restrictions when introducing tasks in the classroom and accept as a pre-condition that they **have** to be carefully selected and adapted to the teaching situation. Interaction cannot be taken to be an essential characteristic of tasks, but rather as a **feature** necessary for a task to be useful when brought into the classroom.

**iv)** Real world tasks cover any aspect and **field** of human activity. Their performance may require the activation of various human resources, physical and cognitive, but language skills are not always needed to carry out a task. If we take that into account, it is difficult to accept that **all** tasks may be equally efficient if applied to the language classroom.

**v)** If the underlying **structural** skeleton of real world tasks is taken as a model for elaborating classroom activities, a further conclusion can be reached. Tasks may admit any kind of goals, including **purely** linguistic ones. There is no reason to exclude linguistic goals from



language tasks. In other words, it does not belong to the nature of 'task' that they be centred on meaning alone. As already commented above, here we face a conceptual problem in relation to tasks. Advocates of tasks in language teaching have appropriated the word and adapted its meaning to their own methodological beliefs. Methodological points of view are, however, different, as are the interpretation and adaptation of task-based approaches to the teaching scene. The reasons for associating tasks with activities focused on meaning, or with process-guided syllabuses must lie somewhere else, not in the nature of the task itself.

It must once more be concluded that TBA needs a re-evaluation and perhaps a reinterpretation of some of its basic assumptions, particularly the nature of the tasks that are useful for the language classroom. Among other things, the idea that teaching through tasks is a 'natural' process, assuming that tasks involve 'natural' procedures does not seem to fit in with reality. Tasks in the classroom may be useful for teaching and learning, but they are, after all, 'pedagogical' devices, among others available. They need and require adaptation for teaching purposes. And in the process they are subject to pedagogical manipulation.

### **COMPLEXITY AND SEQUENCING OF TASKS**

Real world tasks vary in level of complexity. And so do pedagogic tasks. It is not a simple and easy matter to consider that a task may consist of just one or many activities. Moreover, a task may involve some other tasks or sub-tasks as well. 'Buying a ticket' may imply calling the travel agent, catching the bus and paying the fare, discussing the options available, comparing prices, describing holiday resorts, or looking for different options on the internet, reading the types of tickets available, etc. A simple, one-activity task fits any syllabus or classroom with no problem (linguistic resources needed for its performance are easy to define); a task that consists of several activities, or tasks involving other tasks or 'subtasks', may be extremely demanding in terms of words and structures required for their implementation. Learners will have to cope with a relatively easy communicative situation when a task requires only one activity, but the requirements will overcome them when facing a more complex chain of communicative sequences. Teachers for their part will find similar difficulties in 'organizing' or managing learning in such circumstances.

Some authors claim that a TBA should not submit to previously defined syllabuses. And they argue that predefined syllabuses are typically content-based (what to teach is previously defined), while task-based syllabuses should be process — and meaning-guided, where learners build their own syllabus. according to their needs, and find their own learning path applying their innate capacity to fulfil the communicative requirements derived from the task in which they engage. The protagonism of the learners in defining the syllabus should exclude some of the common questions in syllabus design, such as the one concerning the sequencing of learning materials from outside. This issue has kept many authors busy (Skehan 1996; Willis, J. 1996, among others). It is not always clear *when* such sequencing should be carried out (before or after

the materials are used in the classroom), or **who** will be responsible for it (the group of learners, teacher, teacher plus learners, or syllabus specialists). **Coherence** is needed when taking those decisions and the theoretical tenets of the TBA cannot be **left** aside. Sequencing is an **important** problem. After **all**, even when children learn their first language, **acquisition** takes place following a rather universal pattern, which is apparently based, more than on anything else, on the simplicity vs. complexity axis. From a formal point of view, more simple is that which is integrated by a lower number of elements; increasing the number of elements means gaining in complexity. If we approach the question from the point of view of semantics (meaning). the criteria are similar: a simple 'thought' consists of fewer ideas or semantic units, while a more complex 'thought' involves more ideas or semantic units. We know that children first learn sounds (the most simple phonetic units) and from this they turn into more complex phonological units or sequences of sounds: syllables, words, phrases, simple sentences, and subordinated sentences.

Breen (1987b:163) advocates sequencing tasks

**... on the basis of two sets of criteria or on the basis of relating the two. These criteria are: (i) the relative familiarity of the task to the learner's current communicative knowledge and abilities, and (ii) the relative inherent complexity of the task in terms of the demands placed upon a learner.**

One might take those words as the criteria to be applied so as to sequence the syllabus before teaching or learning begin. **And** this can be inferred from Breen's discourse, when he refers, for example, to the 'task designer', or to 'learning tasks planned in advance' (Breen 1987b:164). But, apparently, Breen does not mean what he has previously said: **planning from outside**, or **planning before the group of learners sets to work** would contradict the basic principles of TBA. Breen seems to be conscious of that restriction when he adds,

**These criteria which may guide planning are only half the story. The sequencing of tasks [...] cannot be worked out in advance. Sequencing here depends upon first, the identification of learning problems or difficulties as they arise; second, the prioritising of particular problems and the order in which they may be dealt with; and third, the identification of appropriate learning tasks which address the problem areas.**

*Breen (1987b:164)*

This is more in accordance with Breen's thesis, which assigns protagonism to the learners in defining their own **path** of learning. How could you sequence tasks that **have not yet been** selected? Even the possibility of sequencing is really at stake in this view: the selection of tasks depends on the daily needs of the students, so that it is not possible to **have a list of them in advance**. If such a list is not possible, what can you expect to sequence? Tasks already learnt in the classroom must be necessarily excluded from sequencing. The fact is that in a learner-centred curriculum sequencing of tasks has no meaningful role to play: sequencing requires **some** kind of organization in advance and **some** materials to grade, and both are necessarily absent in a

'non-existent' syllabus.

But if 'there is to be a syllabus', Breen mentions 'the inherent complexity of tasks' as the second criterion to be **taken** into consideration. Here 'complexity' has to be understood in terms of the 'demands placed upon the learner'. Those demands, I **assume**, will derive from,

- the identification and selection of adequate linguistic forms,
- the difficulty of those forms. measured especially in relation to the mother tongue (how 'far' they are from regular and usual patterns in the L1),
- the number of formal linguistic elements required by the task,
- the difficulty in arranging those formal elements,
- the amount of ideas or semantic units the learners will **have** to manipulate or control,
- the cognitive demands that the elicitation of those ideas will require from the learners,
- the degree of efficiency and accuracy needed for communicating those ideas to others.

Such sequencing **does not deviate** much from what should be expected in other types of syllabuses.

If we take the **lesson** as the basic unit of analysis, **several** activities are implemented during the 50 minutes it usually takes. The same scheme will be found if the unit of analysis is a whole academic year, or a two, three or four year **curriculum**. The activities implemented may **have been** planned in advance, or may **have been** selected and developed by the students depending on what they **feel** they need at each specific moment of their learning path. In **all instances** the activities will be chained and constitute a sequence. **Is** it necessary or pedagogically convenient to control such a sequence? Most authors (Candlin 1987; Nunan 1989; Skehan 1996; Ellis 2003:220 ff.) advocate criteria for 'sequencing tasks'. One of the models proposed is based on the complexity of the code (formal code) and the complexity of the content (conceptualisation of what one has to communicate). Other models are more specific (comprehending, production, interaction, Nunan 1989: 118). In any case the need for sequencing tasks **does not** derive so much from the nature of TBA, but rather from the nature of the learning process itself. Human beings seem to be conditioned to proceed, when they learn, from the most simple units or elements, to the more complex ones. And that **is** so regardless of what we learn. Sequencing, therefore, is subject to similar **principles** when applied to task organization, to the selection of the different steps that may constitute the task, or to the linguistic elements used for performing the task. The most general principle governing learning is guided by the transition from simplicity to complexity.

This principle has many facets and offers a wide variety of perspectives. Structural methodologies used to refer to the number of elements needed to build structures or sentences. or the number of **phonetic features** of a sound, or the number of morphemes in a word. A communicative methodology analysed the same concept from the point of view of elements needed for communicative functions. A **further** filter was **later** applied when the linguistic

exponents of functions were selected or not depending on the number of elements included (morphological complexity) and the syntactical patterns involved.

Complexity is not the only criterion, though. The learning of language does not take place on a fully linear basis, by adding simple elements to the more complex ones that we have already acquired. We also learn language 'by chunks', that is memorizing and consolidating 'pieces of language' regardless of their degree of complexity. In those cases, the criterion of complexity does not apply, while others seem to be present, such as a special or urgent communicative need, the familiarity of the learner with the topic of the task, the previous experience of the learner with what is being learnt, etc. From that point of view, the claim of the TBA in favour of a learner-centred syllabus and the primary role of the learner in deciding on what should be taught and learnt, and therefore on which tasks must be planned, is reasonable. Some gaps have to be reserved for coping with factors other than complexity in the learning process. The problem or difficulty lies in defining how much emphasis should be given to each of the various and relevant criteria applicable.

Tasks, as already discussed above, vary in complexity and focus. Moreover, language tasks are not to be equated with other tasks which do not require the use of language for their development. Specific learners may have the cognitive *skills* to perform a particular task, but not necessarily the *linguistic skills* to do or explain what they are doing in the foreign language they learn. And most important, tasks based exclusively on linguistic skills, may not be feasible because learners lack precisely those linguistic skills, for example, because they do not know the right words for the concepts they have in mind. In order to cope with this problem, some authors (e.g. Skehan, 1996) advocate three types of tasks, which have to be introduced into the learning process in this sequence: *pre-task*, *during-task*, *post-task*. *Pre-tasks* begin the sequencing by introducing the language needed for task performance. Skehan (1996:54) refers to that stage as 'some form of pre-teaching'. That sounds very much like the classical 'presentation stage' within the already classical sequence P-P-P. And the activities included would be comprehension-type activities. Performance *during* the task takes place when the task is selected and learners engage in fulfilling the goals of the task. To succeed in that goal, manipulation of language is required and here several factors must be taken into account for the students to proceed successfully. Again, Skehan (1996) mentions 'cognitive complexity', degree of difficulty (neither too easy, nor too difficult) and the correct management of the 'communicative pressure'. Once the goal has been reached, *post-task* activities will need to take care of refining what has been learnt. Students may pay too much attention to fluency, because they already know how to perform the task; in that case emphasis could perhaps be focused on accuracy or restructuring, for example. That will require further practice, repetition of the task, analytical reconsideration of what has been done and how it has been done (the cognitive dimension the implementation of parallel tasks, etc.

The implementation of tasks in the classroom admits variety. Willis, J. (1996) describes the 'task cycle' in three phases, but in more detail and closer to real practice in the classroom:

- a) Pre-task phase: the description of the different activities suggested by Willis takes up again the 'presentation stage' most teachers are used to.
- b) The task cycle: three stages are mentioned here: task, planning and report. In all of them students are supposed to produce natural language, gain fluency and confidence in themselves. Willis and Skehan insist on the need for grammatical accuracy, once the task has been performed. And this is so because during task performance the learners pay attention to meaning and tend to forget grammatical correctness.
- c) Language focus: this emphasizes specific language features. It seems as if the author is considering here a kind of 'remedial' final task. Since focus on meaning should have been the rule throughout the two previous phases, it is now time for 'language focus activities'. Language activities refer to semantics, lexis, morphology, syntax and phonetics/phonology.

Planning in advance the sequencing of tasks, or activities within a task, does not fit well in a process syllabus, centred on learners and learning, with the students having the main responsibility for building their own learning path. But some basic facts of learning and the classroom environment and practice appear to outweigh theoretical and abstract conceptualisations. This seems to be the case of TBA regarding sequencing: its theoretical framework claims to fully transfer to the learners the elaboration of the syllabus and therefore the organization of the tasks and activities. But 'real teachers and real learners' are reluctant to accept this approach, sometimes with sound arguments on their side. The more TBA is analysed and the more this issue is investigated, the more one is forced to admit that a planned sequencing of activities is needed. The challenge is to offer a sequencing scheme without seriously hindering the linguistic potential of the learner and his capacity for getting himself involved in the learning process.

### **A BALANCED CRITICISM**

The role of meaning in language has been heavily emphasized in the communicative approach and in all its methodological variants. From this perspective, earlier practices and methods have been partially undervalued or distorted. It is true that in the structural approaches emphasis was not placed on meaning, but one cannot simply say that meaning was totally disregarded in this method. A parallel can be found in the way all methodologies react against previous approaches: they tend to build a simplistic and distorted picture of the 'newcomers', stressing contrasts that will work in favour of the new elements proposed. In the 'new method' emphasis will also be placed on a limited set of features, while the other intervening elements will be pushed into the background. TBA is not an exception to this rule: emphasis on meaning and process carries with it that grammar and discrete goals are relegated to a secondary place and a subsidiary role. In a similar way, cognitive factors in learning, traditionally associated with grammar and form, are

given a minor part to play or not taken into consideration. Early enthusiasm about TBA has been tempered somewhat and it is becoming increasingly clear that emphasis on meaning alone does not result in more effective language acquisition. As usual, a balance must be found between the role assigned to meaning and the necessary focus on linguistic form. The complexity of the language acquisition process demands a more realistic approach to the teaching-learning situation.

Dissatisfaction with learning and its outcomes is and has been common among learners. But such a feeling is not exclusive to one specific methodology alone. Complaints about poor results in second language learning are particularly outstanding in the educational system all over the world and are well illustrated in the history of pedagogy. Students begin the second language curriculum when they are 6 years old and they keep studying a second language for ten academic years or more. In spite of that, most secondary students leave school unable to communicate effectively in the language they have supposedly learnt. Instruction has not been completely useless, but it does not meet the standard theoretically required in the curriculum. Such a stubborn reality triggers a permanent reconsideration and questioning of methods in teaching and is responsible for cyclical shifts in opposite or complementary directions. Present SLA research and findings may be taken as a reliable point of reference for a more balanced solution to the problem.

Expectations in second language learning should be significantly moderated and adjusted to the achievement of reasonable goals. The learning of a second language by teenagers and adults should renounce the permanent comparison with native language learning; second language learners cannot expect to become 'native language learners' or 'native language speakers'. We should rather work within a scale (See figure 1) with a maximum goal (native-like results) and a minimum (communicative effectiveness, in written or oral language, or in both modalities). Perhaps language goals in the school system will have to be defined taking into account the real situation of language acquisition in a non-natural environment, and specifically in the classroom environment. To that must be added the fact that second language learning is not usually given priority in the curriculum and the educational environment for using a foreign language is far from ideal.



Figure 1

TBA, like all communicative approaches, tries to recreate natural learning conditions in the classroom. The reason is that natural conditions are assumed to be ideal for learning a language,

as already proclaimed in the history of language teaching. Now this view is put forward together with other related or supporting assumptions, some of them connected to SLA research:

- Everyone is born with innate abilities to learn a language (which makes instruction not totally necessary).
- Experience tells us that many people learn two languages and they keep using them successfully throughout their lives (therefore, one can infer that the learning of a second language should not be so difficult).
- Failure comes when formal instruction takes place, where the focus is on form and intellectual abilities, instead of focusing on meaningful interaction (moving away from the natural learning process).
- Personal involvement in the learning process is a key factor for more efficient learning (motivation is a decisive factor in learning).

The issue, however, is whether 'natural conditions' can be recreated in the classroom. If the kind of tasks we can work with in the classroom are different from real world tasks as explained above— it is difficult to agree with the TBA, which aims to recreate such a natural learning environment precisely by means of tasks, when they have to be necessarily 'pedagogical tasks'. Other assumptions do not necessarily apply to adult learning. It is a well-known thesis that innate abilities of human beings for learning languages do not last forever with the same intensity. And the fact applies regardless of whether we have learnt one or more languages in a natural environment.

Research on SLA (Long and Crookes, 1992; Pienemann and Johnston, 1987) does not support the conclusion that instructed learning is a failure either; rather, the contrary seems to be the case: instruction helps learning. Instruction, we know, is not essential for acquiring languages in a natural environment, but it definitely helps if we want to gain in accuracy and, as a result, also in efficiency and in a more refined communicative capacity.

Most methodologists and researchers in SLA admit today that second language learning is favoured when at least three conditions are met:

- a) That learners be exposed to the language. There is a direct relationship between exposure to the language and linguistic acquisition. Exposure counts as a necessary input phase before the learners are able to generate any output and refers both to the oral and written language. Research in SLA has reinforced this hypothesis, first formulated by Krashen.
- b) That learners use the language and practise with it, especially in a communicative context. Practical work with language may be quite varied, though. Communicative use of language is one of the factors that usually increase motivation.
- c) That learners are motivated to use the target language orally and in writing or reading.

Points b) and c) are not new in pedagogy, at least in their basic claims. Point a) has been intensively revindicated by the communicative method and the TBA is consistent with its communicative roots in assuming a similar claim. TBA **does** not seem to be based on new learning **principles**. Rather it offers a novel way of being exposed to and practising the language, and at the same time involving and motivating the student. This novel way is the *task*. Practising and using the language by means of a task is supposed to produce more effective learning.

What about formal instruction? Teaching in the classroom offers **some** advantages, but is **also** subject to important restrictions. Two of them are **particularly** relevant **here**: instruction usually predefines the content of what is to be learnt, and the learning conditions do not favour simulation of real world tasks or the recreation of the natural environment in the classroom. It is obvious that not **all** methodologies fit equally well into this framework. The grammar-translation method, as well as the structural approaches, goes hand in hand with what is required from teachers and students in the classroom. But other methods do not, as was the case with the Direct Method, or with Gouin's method, and now with the TBA. The reason lies in the nature of real world tasks; they cannot **enter** the classroom without undergoing substantial changes. The adaptations that real world tasks must undergo in the classroom eliminate **some** of the original and natural communicative **features** attributed to tasks in TBAs. As a way of illustrating the issue, people who perform real world tasks 'in real daily life' already **have** a good command of the language, or perform tasks suited to their command of the language; they do not need to pay explicit attention to linguistic use. When students of a language do a task in a learning situation, the context varies **significantly**, since they **have** to do the task and at the same time learn the linguistic elements needed to reach the **desired** goal. Unknown words or structures will not come automatically to the mind of the learner. There must be **some** effort on **his/her** part to look for those words and restructure them with other linguistic elements already available. This action takes place unconsciously in a natural environment, when learning the mother tongue. But then we should consider how different the situation is in the foreign language classroom (age, 'desperate need' to learn to communicate with the community, favourable context, no time pressure...).

Formal instruction in general should not be underestimated as a useful and perhaps indispensable tool for transmitting human knowledge. The same applies to language learning. The challenge for the TBA is how to integrate the **necessary** instruction within the set of activities derived from pedagogical tasks and centred on meaning. Such models must be **still** designed, applied and evaluated.

Advocates of innovative approaches tend to be over-enthusiastic about their potential. It is rewarding to read such paragraphs as this one on the TBA:

In task-based learning, communication tasks (where language **forms** are not controlled) involve learners in an entirely different mental process as they compose what they want to say, **expressing** what they think or feel.

*J. Willis (1993:18)*



But there are sound arguments against and serious doubts about every one of the statements produced by this author. Are they to be taken as 'wishful thinking'? Teachers are well aware of how difficult it is for a student to express 'what he thinks or feels' in a foreign language, unless there is a lot of previous work on what has to be said. What the nature of such 'previous work' is remains very much the question methods try to solve. The TBA tries to do it through task work. But tasks point to a final **outcome**, and what is to be done on the way to this is the question: something previous is required to succeed in task performance. Is that formal instruction? Or just focus-on-form instruction (Ellis 2002, 2003)? Or formal instruction plus practice? Or formal instruction plus practice plus cognitive consciousness about the language being learnt?

Explicit instruction refers to **all** the events and actions affecting teaching in the classroom, such as organizing the syllabus, deciding on the tasks to be selected and on their sequencing, elaborating the activities required by each task, giving advice on the suitable linguistic elements for the task —**especially** if there are **several** options, as is the case for most tasks —, etc.

Instruction implies that the cognitive component of the learners is activated. There is nothing wrong in that. Cognitive skills constitute a decisive difference between humans and other **animals**. They should not be put aside but advantage should be taken of them. It is true that classroom practices tend to emphasize formal aspects of language. Again, this is not a negative **feature** of language use: accuracy and fluency do not contradict each other: rather, they complement each other.

The **importance** of comprehensible input in language learning was first emphasized by Krashen (1982; 1985). Since then, this has been a **generally** accepted principle. TBA is firmly rooted in that principle. Tasks are considered ideal tools for providing meaningful linguistic materials; at the same time, **carrying** out the tasks requires the use of language materials and even recursive practice with them. **Does** that mean that comprehensible input alone is enough? Is there any **evidence** that forces the exclusion of instruction as additional cognitive input? Findings on this issue point in the opposite direction: productive skills are rather poor in students with a high degree of comprehensible input (Sheen 1983:136), while receptive skills are **certainly** favoured by intensive exposure to the language. Experience by many teachers and learners goes along with these findings: language learnt in the natural environment gains in fluency, but abounds in formal inaccuracies; instructed learning produces more accurate output, but is poorer in fluency (this same analysis is **often** found in the history of language teaching; see Sanchez. 1992).

Instruction, therefore, is not negative per se, as one sometimes perceives when reading about TBA and process approaches. Instruction is a helpful 'tool', and so it must be kept. The history of mankind supports this positive view. But it is not a 'perfect tool'; nor is it the only tool for learning. However one analyses the issue, the conclusion is **similar** and **valid** for **all**

methodologies: success in teaching and learning depends mainly on how well the complexity of the teaching-learning situation is handled. A key word has to be mentioned again: balance.

The need for a balanced methodology is not exclusive to the TBA. A review of methods in the history of language teaching reveals how strongly and sometimes fiercely the new methods rail against the current ones. And opponents base their claims on the failure of old methods to facilitate learning. We know, nonetheless, that many people have succeeded in their learning of languages with all methods. This fact forces us to believe that perhaps too often innovative methods gain their share of prestige in the methodological scene by claiming failure and dissatisfaction with other methods. The cycle, however, will not end, and the innovative methods will soon become obsolete. To think of new methods basically as attempts to adapt to the specific needs of the time would be a more reasonable view. It would also be wrong to reject any methodological innovation because 'the majority of educational innovation results in failure' (Adams and Chen, 1981, in Sheen, 1994:127).

The TBA has gained some momentum in the nineties. The group of scholars 'leading the way' seem to base their methodological claims on a limited set of assumptions and principles, which are generously endowed with well sounding words and concepts. Their arguments are not always convincing and research in the new approach is still insignificant. This pattern is not new in the history of educational innovations: most of them offer a similar profile in this respect. The question is whether the teaching-learning situation gains in efficiency. The answer to this question is far from being conclusive or positive.

The TBA must be included within the inductive methods: learners are supposed to internalise the linguistic system through practice. The Direct Method, the Audiolingual Method and approaches generically called 'communicative' are also inductive. Much has been written on the advantages or disadvantages of both ways of learning. But experimental research on methods reveals that deductive methods or their variants produce better results than inductive ones (Sheen 1994:129-130). These findings may already introduce a caveat to the TBA. A second factor that is relevant here is the role of formal instruction in language learning. Process approaches —and the TBA is to be placed within this mainstream— are well known because they stress the role of the students and marginalize or assign a secondary role to the action of the teacher and instruction. In so doing, research on the positive effects of deductive methods is, deliberately or not, simply stranded. Since formal instruction is connected to deductive methodologies, it has to be underestimated, as indeed it is in the TBA. Sheen (1994:133ff) brings in some data that help to point out some contradictions in Long's (1988) and Long and Crookes' (1992) arguments regarding the role of instruction in language learning. I referred above to similar 'conceptual gaps' in the views of some advocates of the TBA, who sometimes seem to argue on the basis of preconceived, but not proven, principles.

## CONCLUSION

Looking back into the past illustrates what is really new in the TBA. The emphasis on the communicative learning or teaching of languages is not new, but it offers at least a partially different way of being exposed to and practising with the language. This leads us to classify TBA within the 'conversational and/or natural approach' (Sánchez 1992; 1997). But new methods are not to be taken as innately good and efficient by their nature, or simply because they are new. It must be admitted that the TBA faces most of the problems inherent in natural methods, particularly when applied to adult learners of a second language. The difference between real world tasks and pedagogical tasks is at the very centre of the problem. The classroom environment cannot be equated to the real world environment, or at least not fully equated to it. In a parallel way, learning a language in a natural environment—particularly in the early stages of life—differs considerably from learning a language as an academic subject.

The history of teaching languages offers a long list of methods to teach and learn languages. I am not suggesting in this paper that we should reject new proposals and novel ideas, but I strongly feel that what we urgently need is to do more research on the mechanisms of learning and accompany new proposals and methods with more experimental evidence before we bring them into the classroom. Abstract constructs may be well elaborated and their elements may also be logically intertwined, but something more than that is needed for them to work in practice. The TBA adds useful elements and contributes to the communicative language teaching with valuable procedures. But it would be naive to take it as 'the method' language teachers and learners have been waiting for.

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