THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER IN PLANNING AND MONITORING STUDENTS' WORK ON COMMUNICATIVE TASKS.

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INTRODUCTION

In this article, some definitions of tasks and types of tasks are provided and the role of the teacher in planning and monitoring students' work on communicative tasks is reviewed.

Most applied linguists would agree that there are six major areas to consider in the design of a successful language teaching programme: needs identification, syllabus, materials, methodology, testing and evaluation. The most important of these is syllabus design, and within syllabus design, the central issue is choice of the unit of analysis: word, structure, notion, function, topic, situation or task.

As Long (1989) mentions numerous studies show that teachers of languages and other school subjects plan, conduct and recall their lesson, not in terms of methods, but rather as sequences of instructional activities or tasks. Nunan (1989) also says that many teachers focus on "classroom tasks and activities rather than following a logical sequence of needs analysis/entry behaviour specification, objective setting, task design and evaluation". (p.22)

WHAT IS A TASK ?

According to Prabhu (1987:24) "an activity which requires 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'".

Nunan (1988:45) provides two definition of `task':

"...a piece of work undertaken for one self 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... In other words, by `task' is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life". (Long, 1985:89)

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"...an activity or action which is carried out as the result of processing or understanding language (i.e. as a response). For example, drawing a map while listening to an instruction and performing a command...A task usually requires the teacher to specify what will be regarded as successful completion of the task. (Richards, Platt, and Weber, 1985:289)

The study by Brown (1991) defines tasks along three categories:

1. tight/loose in terms of instructions;

2. closed/open in terms of questions;

3. procedural/interpretive in terms of whether the participants need to interpret the data, and negotiate their interpretations.

These categories, according to Bygate (1993), are not clear cut, particularly if the terms are to be used to apply to a large number of types of tasks; the definitions need operationalising for careful study to be undertaken.

The 'communicative task', according to Nunan (1989), "is 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" (p.10). The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right.

Task-Based syllabus organise and present what is to be achieved through teaching and learners in terms of how a learner may engage his/her communicative competence in undertaking a range of tasks. It also addresses how learners may develop this competence through learning. The Task-Based syllabus is, in a sense, two syllabuses side by side; a syllabus of communication tasks and a syllabus of learning-for-communication tasks which serve to facilitate a learner's participation in the former. In analytic terms, task contains some form of input data which might be verbal (eg. a dialogue or reading passage) or non-verbal (eg. picture sequence and an activity which is in some way derived from the input and which sets out what the learners are to do in relation to the input. The task, also has a goal and roles for teachers and learners. Nunan (1989) presents the following framework for analyzing communicative tasks (p.11):

```
Goals          Teacher role
    \        /
input—— tasks ——Learner role
    /        \
activities    settings
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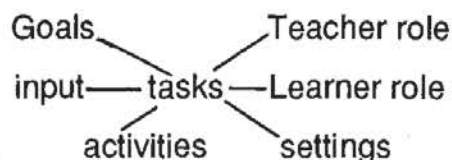
Brown (1991:2) reviews the literature which looks at the amount of negotiation of meaning occurring in one-way and two-way tasks. `Two-way tasks' is the term used for tasks in which "both participants possesses some but not all of the information they need to resolve the task, and so while everyone is able to contribute information, everyone also needs to get information". Jigsaw tasks are typical two-way task. A one-way task is one in which "one participant or some participants possess all the information and the others have to get this information". A learner describing a picture to another is a typical one-way task. Doughty & Pica (1986) re-explore the question of two-way and one-way tasks using the terms `required information exchange' and `optional information exchange'. The literature. which is suited within the Second Language Approach, found that two-way information exchange tasks were the best for promoting negotiation of meaning.

Nunan (1989:40) points out that classroom tasks are generally justified or rationalised in either `real-world' or `pedagogic' terms. Tasks with a real-world rationale require learners to approximate, in class, the sort of behaviour required of them in the world beyond the classroom. Tasks with a pedagogic rationale, on the other hand, require learners to do things which it is extremely unlikely they would be called upon to do outside the classroom. Long (1989:p.6) says that pedagogic tasks are the problem-solving activities teachers and learners work on in the classroom. Tasks lend themselves to stimulating, intellectually challenging materials, especially those of a problem-solving nature, and of a kind which seem meaningful to teachers planning and implementing lessons. They are enabling learners to rehearse real-world behaviours, they must have an alternative rationale. This usually takes a psycholinguistic form. While the selection of real-world tasks will proceed with reference to some form of needs analysis, pedagogic tasks will be selected with reference to some theory or model of second language education. The distinction being drawn by Nunan (1989:40) is illustrated as follows:

Communicative classroom tasks

Real-world ← → Pedagogic

Rehearsal   Psycholinguistic
↓   ↓
Needs analysis   SLA theory/research
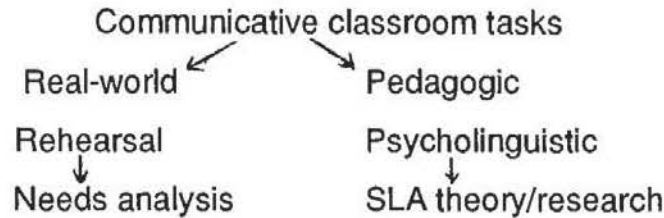
Candlin (1987), in Nunan (1989:47), suggests that tasks should contain input, roles, settings, actions, monitoring, outcomes, and feedback. Input refers to the data presented for learners to work on. Roles specify the relationship between participants in a task. Setting refers to the classroom and out-of-class arrangements entailed in the task. Actions are the procedures and sub-tasks to be performed by the learners. Monitoring refers to the supervision of the task in progress. Out comes are goals of the tasks and feedback refers to the evaluation of the task.

According to Wright (1987:33), a task is more than just an activity, more than 'doing something'. In the context of classroom language learning, there are various tasks which teachers and learners have to perform. They must be seen as "goal-directed", both in the short term, during a lesson, and over the long term, during a course". A task is goal-directed in the sense of bringing about changes in behaviour or knowledge. Within an activity, there may be a number of tasks to perform, each with its own definite goal. For example, think about the 'reading lesson' as an' activity, within which a number of tasks may be performed by both teachers and learners, such as organizing the classroom layout, presenting the texts in whatever way is seemed appropriate, doing 'exercises' on the texts and so on.

TEACHER ROLE

Richards and Rodgers (1986:24) point out that teacher roles are related the following issues:

1- the types of functions of teachers are expected to fulfil, eg. whether that of practice director, counsellor or model.

2- the degree of control the teacher has over how learning takes place

3- the degree to which the teacher is responsible for content

4- the interactional patterns that develop between teachers and learners.

According to Wright (1987:51), teachers have two major roles in the classroom:

1- to create the conditions under which learning can take place: the social side of teaching (management function)

2- to impart, by variety of means, knowledge to their learners: the task-oriented side of teaching (instructional function).

Richards & Rodgers (1986) suggest that learner roles are closely related to the functions and status of the teacher. They point out that some methods are totally teacher dependent, while others view the teacher as a catalyst, consultant or guide. Some years ago, there was an attempt to "teacher-proof" instruction by limiting the role of the teacher to that of "manager of materials". Dubin and Olshtain (1986 as in Nunan, 1989:81,82), look at a range of metaphors for providing an account of teacher and learner roles. They suggest that:

The terms play and players hold out a rich potential for developing a metaphor concerning language learners. Only superficially is plays recreational activity, confined to the interests of the children...As a player, one must participate actively. At the same time, one must concentrate by observing what others do. Players take part in all of communicative language course: as individuals, in pairs, in small groups, and in whole group displays. As players, participants can come to view language learning as something quite different from`knowing' which they associate with other schooling experiences in their lives.

According to Breen & Candlin (1980), the teacher has three main-roles in the communicative classroom. The first is to act as facilitator of the communicative process, the second is to act as a participant, and the third is to act as an observer and learner.

Other roles assumed for teachers are:

a) *needs analyst:* The teacher in the communicative classroom has a responsibility for determining and responding to learner language needs. This may be done informally (one-to-one sessions with students) or formally (administering a needs assessment instrument). On the basis of such needs assessment, teachers are expected to plan group and individual instructions that respond the learners' needs.

b) *counsellor:* The teacher is expected to exemplify an effective communicator seeking to maximize "The meshing of speaker intention and

hearer interpretation, through the use of paraphrase, confirmation and feedback" (Richards & Rodgers, 1986:78).

c) *group process manager:* Communicative language teaching procedures often require teachers to acquire less teacher-centred classroom management skills. It is the teacher's responsibility to organize the classroom as a setting for communication and communicative activities. "Guidelines for classroom practice (eg. Littlewood,1981; Finocchiare and Brumfit, 1983) suggest that during an activity the teacher monitors, encourages and suppresses the inclination to supply gaps in lexis, grammar, and strategy but notes such gaps for later commentary and communicative practice" (Richards & Rodgers, 1986:78). At the conclusion of group activities, the teacher leads in the debriefing of the activity, pointing out alternatives and extensions and assisting groups in self-correction discussion.

Larsen-Freeman (1986:130) also agrees with Richards and Rodgers saying that the teacher is a facilitator of his students' learning. As such he has many roles to fulfil. He is a "manager of classroom activities". In this role, one of his major responsibilities is to establish situations likely to promote communication. During the activities he acts as an "advisor", answering students' questions and monitoring their performance. At other times he might be a "co-communicator"- engaging in the communicative activity along with the students.

An important trend in the language teacher development in recent years has been a move away from the teacher as passive recipient and implementer of other people's syllabuses and methods, towards the idea of the teacher as a active creator of his or her own materials, classroom activities and so on.
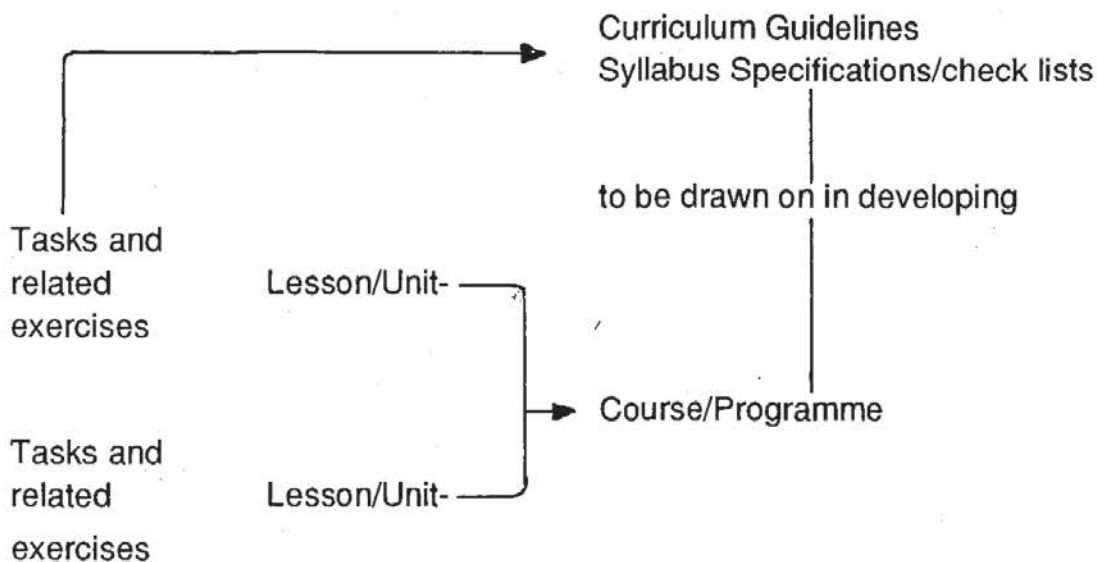
TEACHERS AS PLANNER

According to Nunan (1989), Classroom teachers tend to see lessons or units of work as the basic building blocks of their programmes. The lessons and units in turn are composed of sets of more or less integrated tasks and manipulative exercises of various sorts. The teacher's immediate preoccupation is thus with learning tasks and with integrating these into lessons and/or units.

There has been a great deal of research on teachers as planners. The research, as Shavelson and Stern (1981 in Nunan, 1989), point out is based on two fundamental assumptions. The first one is that teachers are

rational beings whose work requires them to make decisions in complex environments. The second is that what teachers actually do in class is guided by their thoughts, judgements and decisions which in turn will be influenced by their training, personal characteristics, etc. The research on the effect of `task' on teachers' decision making shows that `task' seems to be the central concept for teachers.

For the classroom teaching, a planning framework is shown like the following by Nunan (1986: 18):

```
                                      Curriculum Guidelines
                                      Syllabus Specifications/check lists


                                      to be drawn on in developing

Tasks and
related              Lesson/Unit-
exercises

                                    Course/Programme
Tasks and
related              Lesson/Unit-
exercises
```

The notion of tasks therefore has an immediate relevancy, and planning for the teacher is a matter of putting tasks together. Teachers more often do their detailed planning in relation to lessons or unit of work.

As Nunan (1989:138) says, when designing activities, a teacher needs to decide whether he/she wants learners to rehearse in class tasks which they will, want to carry out in the real world. If the task have a pedagogic rationale, then you need to be clear what this is. It is not good enough to set learners tasks on the basis that they seemed a good idea at the time, or because they worked well with other class. You also need to consider the roles that both you and the students will adopt in carrying out the task and assess whether these roles are appropriate to the given group. Setting and learner configurations also need to be considered. Getting learners in and out of groups of different sizes quickly and efficiently so that time on task is maximised is an important classroom management skill.

When monitoring the task, you will want to keep a close on the actual language which is generated. This will often differ from what had been

predicted. It is a good idea to record teacher-fronted and small group interactions from time to time and use these to review and evaluate the task.

As Littlewood (1981) says, in communicative activities, teacher's role becomes less dominant but more important. For example, if learner find themselves unable to cope with the demands of a situation, the teacher can offer advice or provide necessary language items. If students can not agree on any point, he can resolve their disagreement. In other words, he is available as a source of guidance and help. His presence in this capacity may be an important psychological support for many learners, especially for those who are slow to develop independence. Again, while learners are performing, the teacher can monitor their strengths and weaknesses. Even though he may not intervene at the time, he can use weaknesses as sings of learning needs which he must cater for later, probably through more controlled, "pre-communicative" and "communicative" activities in the course, each type reinforcing and providing input to the other. The teacher may also move about the classroom in order to monitor the strengths and weaknesses of the learners, as a basis for planning future learning activities.

Nunan (1989:86) points out that authority; power and control become major issue with the rise of communicative language teaching. When we ask learners to communicate in a language over which they have only partial control, we are asking them to take risks which many of them may feel unhappy about.

ORGANISING CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

We expect individuals in certain roles to have extensive knowledge about certain subjects. In the role of the teacher, we may discern two related types of knowledge being utilized. First, the procedural knowledge of how to organize and set up classroom activities, and the second, `subject' knowledge of the language being taught. The two are linked through teaching methods and techniques which are aimed at bringing about learning.

Wright (1987) says that a teacher's primary job when setting up learning activities is managerial. (eg. Giving learners plenty of encouragement for their efforts; ignoring disruptive behaviour and praising appropriate behaviour; giving pupils responsibility for their learning; motivating the learner). He also mentions that, the teacher organizes classroom activities, sets up learning tasks which involve routine control and assists the learners in doing these activities.

Harner (1983), in Wright (1987:55) claims that the teacher plays the role of controller when he is totally in charge of the class. He controls not only what the students do, but when they speak and what language they use. Clearly the introduction of new language often involves the teacher in a controlling role, particularly at the accurate reproduction stage. In my view, it is not necessary for the teacher to be "totally in charge of the class" at all times and I don't think that the introduction of new language always involve the teacher in a controlling role. Learners can also play a role. Furthermore, it is not realistic for learners to speak only when they are allowed to. They should feel free to talk when they have anything to say.

Wright (1987:72) mentions about an `inquiry-centred learning'. According to this approach the teacher is primarily a facilitator, setting up tasks and providing the instructional materials. In this approach he is also a guide to process of discovery and understanding. The basic assumption is that learners will learn more if they are given opportunities to participate in discovering ideas for themselves.

Main procedures of *inquiry-centred learning* are:

1- The teacher plans in advance the topic and ideas that the class may wish to explore. The teacher then organizes a sequence of teaching/learning activities around them.

2- The teacher introduces the new material and challenges the learners to try out and explore new ideas.

3- The teacher insists on the communication of ideas and beliefs from the class and justifications for opinions expressed.

4- The teacher recaps, summarizes, and asks for clarification as and when necessary.

5- The teacher gives the learners the opportunity to guess and `play hunches'.

6- The class is organized into small working groups.

There are several ways of organizing the learning group;

1- to put the class into small groups for certain tasks

2- to have everyone ranged round the wall, in a circle

3- to arrange the learning group in a horseshoe.

A variety of seating arrangements may be employed during the course of a single lesson.

There is, in fact, a bunch of classroom-centred research which has conducted some interesting investigations into the types of task likely to stimulate interactive language use. In an early study, Long et al. (1976) found that small-group work prompted students to use a greater range of language functions than whole-class activities (see Nunan, 1989:44). Littlewood (1981) also says that, small groups provide greater intensity of involvement, so that the quality of language practice is increased and the opportunities for feedback and monitoring also, given adequate guidance and preparation by the teacher. Freeman (1986) also agrees the idea of small group and says that small numbers of students interacting are favoured in order to maximize the time allotted to each student for learning to negotiate meaning. Doughty and Pica (1986) in their study, explored the effects of task type and participation pattern on language classroom interaction. As a result of the study, they concluded that group work and pair-work is capable of providing students with opportunities to produce the target language and to modify interaction. But to be effective group interaction must be carefully planned by the classroom teacher to include a requirement for a two way or multi way exchange of information. Thus the role of the teacher, they say, is critical not only in providing students with access to grammatical input, but also in setting up the conditions for successful second language acquisition in the classroom.

CONCLUSION

Much more can be said about teacher roles, of course, and the literature is largely concerned with redefining learner and teacher roles.

The involment of learner-centredness in curriculum, planning, implementation and evaluation requires the adaptation of new roles by all those involved in curriculum process, but particulary on the part of the teacher. The teacher have to accept that learners have a right to have their views incorporated into the selection of content and learning experiences, and need to provide learners with the appropriate opportunities for them to make choices. Learners, for their part, need to develop a range of skills. related not only to language, but also to learning and learning how to learn.

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