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Task-based learning: progress and challenges

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Introduction

Task-based learning (TBL), also referred to as task-based language teaching (TBLT) has been subject to considerable interest and research ever since its emergence in the 1980s (Ellis et al., 2020). It's status as a communicative approach to language teaching has risen to the point where it is now considered to be at the forefront of second / foreign language pedagogy. A wealth of diverse publications have been devoted towards TBL, covering topics such as assessment (Long and Norris, 2000), technology (Thomas and Reinders, 2010), instruction (Willis 1996; Baralt et al., 2014), syllabus design (Ellis et al., 2020), individual learner differences (Robinson, 2002,) and young learners (Shintani, 2016). Given TBL's extensive coverage, the purpose of this paper is to provide a concise review on the progress of task-based learning research from its origins to the current period, reporting on key publications and discussing some of the issues that have arisen with implementing the approach.

We begin with an historical review of TBL literature. The next section discusses the definition of a task, followed by an outline of the methodology of task-based learning and measures used to assess learners' performance during TBL. The next section reviews a focal point within task-based literature; covering the influence of task planning on learners' performance of tasks. We then look at studies that have investigated the effects of task sequencing on second language (L2) production and development. Finally, the last section discusses educational and cultural issues of implementing TBL within Asian contexts.

An historical review of task-based learning

Ellis et al. (2020) chronicle the history of TBL within second language

teaching. TBL was borne out of communicative language teaching (CLT) which "aims to develop the ability of learners to use language in real communication" (Ellis, 2003, p. 27). CLT became prevalent during the 1980s due to the dissatisfaction of structural approaches to language teaching which involved identifying and selecting linguistic features and practising them correctly using controlled exercises. Early advocates for communicative approaches such as Prabhu (1987) questioned the effectiveness of structural approaches for developing students' communicative language skills where the focus was placed on using grammatical forms accurately. The growing need for language teaching to place more emphasis on fluency development and authentic language use led to CLT forming 'weak' and 'strong' versions (Howatt, 1984, p. 279). The former replaced the instruction and practice of linguistic features with language functions, such as 'greetings', 'apologizing' and 'inviting'. This led to the introduction of functional syllabi where learners would practice functions using communicative activities. However, as Ellis (2003) noted, this version was not altogether different from a structural approach, as the linguistic elements of the functions were still identified and practiced using a similar methodology. The 'strong' version, however, "advances the claim that language is acquired through communication" (Howatt, 1984, p. 279). In such an approach, language items were not preselected for controlled practice, but rather, learners were exposed to communicative tasks which placed an emphasis on fluency and authentic language use. This version led the foundations for TBLT.

Prabhu (1987) was one of the earliest TBL studies in which task-based curriculums were implemented into secondary schools in India from 1979 to 1985, referred to as the Bangalore Communicational Teaching Project (CTP). Meaning-based tasks were sequenced together containing 'pre-tasks' that involved instructions and guidance from the teacher to the class as a whole, followed by students completing the tasks themselves. The CTP was evaluated and considered an overall success in developing learners' communication skills, although Willis and Willis (2001) questioned the reliability of the project's findings. For example, the degree to which the teachers involved (of whom were non-native speakers of English) were trained to teach TBLT accordingly, such as refraining

from explicit grammar instruction of an instructional approach. Nevertheless, the CTP contributed to further interest in TBL research.

Around the same time, Krashen (1981) argued that in order for L2 acquisition to occur, learners simply needed to be exposed to meaning-based input, in the form of reading or listening. He argued that L2 acquisition can occur in a similar way to first language (L1) acquisition, as a subconscious process, and that explicit grammar instruction was not necessary, as learners could 'pick-up' new linguistic features incidentally providing the input, as a whole, was generally comprehensible to their current L2 level. Long (1983) subsequently introduced his interaction hypothesis which supports Krashen's (1981) comprehensible input claims but stresses that acquisition is facilitated to a greater extent when new input can be modified through negotiation of meaning. That is, any difficultly in comprehending new linguistic features can be addressed by learners clarifying its meaning through interacting and asking questions. Task-based learning facilitates the psycholinguistic processing of incidental acquisition where learners attempt to complete a communicative task, and any difficult language that they may encounter during communication can be comprehended through clarifying its meaning (Ellis et al., 2020). In order to examine the process of task-based learning in detail, let us first define what we mean by a 'task.'

Defining a Task

Due to the amount of research published on TBL, multiple definitions of a task have been stated such as "a piece work or an activity usually with a specified objective, undertaken as part of an educational course, or at work, or used to elicit data for research" (Crookes, 1986, p.1). Long (1985) refers to a task as "the one hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play, and in between" (p. 85). Such definitions appear varied in meaning, for example, the former relates more towards an educational tool, whereas the latter relates more towards real world purposes (Sanchez, 2004). Furthermore, they can also be vague, for example Crookes (1986) reference to an 'objective' could relate to any type of goal or outcome. Consequently, definitions as to what constitutes a task, or what separates a task from an activity, has led to some confusion in the field

of language teaching (Ellis, 2009b). As a result, Ellis and Shintani (2014, p.135) attempt to provide clarity to the definition of a task by outlining four distinct criteria that must be adhered to in order for a pedagogic activity to qualify as a task:

Table 1: Definition of a task (adapted from Ellis and Shintani, 2014, p. 135)

1. "The primary focus should be on 'meaning'". Learners should be mainly focused on understanding or expressing communicative intent. They should not be focusing on linguistic form, but rather processing the overall meaning of messages as well as producing them for communication.
2. "There should be some kind of 'gap'". A gap requires a need to communicate. For example, students could be working in pairs on the same activity, but partner 'A' may have some missing information that partner 'B' has, which creates a communicative incentive for the students to exchange information.
3. "Learners should largely rely on their own resources (linguistic and non-linguistic) in order to complete the activity." In other words, they cannot receive instruction on the language required to perform the task, they must rely on their own linguistic knowledge, as well as non-linguistic, for example, gestures, in order to complete the task.
4. "There is a clearly defined outcome other than the use of language" The purpose of the task is to achieve a non-linguistic outcome. In other words, learners should be focused on completing the goal of the task, rather than using language accurately.

By providing this criteria, Ellis (2009b) aims to distinguish a task from an activity, or a "situational grammar exercise" (p. 223). A situational exercise is provided by Willis and Willis (2001, p. 177) in the form of a role-play, where learners are typically provided with language phrases to act out a performance. In other words, they are speaking for the sake of speaking. This pedagogic tool would resemble an activity as opposed to a task. Whereas if learners were required to perform a restaurant role-play where the objective was to spend 50 dollars in a restaurant, this pedagogic tool would resemble a task. Learners would be required to use their own linguistic resources to complete the task that has a real-world outcome, allowing learners to focus on meaning and engage in

authentic language use, thus fulfilling the outlined criteria.

Finally, Ellis (2009b) points out that tasks are not limited to speaking skills. Input tasks can target either listening or reading skills, and are particularly useful for young learners with limited L2 speaking skills, and offers a means of developing their L2 knowledge. An example of an input listening task is found in Ellis (2020) where learners are provided with pictures of women with different physical descriptions and actions, and they have to listen to their teacher's description and choose the correct picture. Thus, linguistic input from the teacher, in this case vocabulary related to physical descriptions can help build learners' knowledge to a point where they could then start performing output speaking tasks. There has been growing literature on the benefits of input tasks (see for example, Shintani, 2016).

Now that we have established a definition of a task, the next step is to examine how language learning occurs through the use of output tasks. Tasks alone appear to be useful tools for interaction, thus benefitting fluency, but how can vocabulary or grammatical features be acquired? The next section will explore this learning process.

Task-based learning

As we saw earlier in the paper, task-based learning under Prabhu (1987) involved a two stage 'pre-task - task' format, with the first stage serving as teacher instruction followed by the second stage serving as the learners' task performance. Willis (1996) provides an alternative structure involving three stages; a 'pre-task', 'task', 'post-task' and this format is still influential today (see figure 1).

The purpose of the pre-task stage is for the teacher to provide instructions and prepare students to perform the task. In line with our earlier definition, Willis (1996) does not advocate the pre-teaching of language to complete a task, but rather to use the pre-task stage to activate learners own linguistic resources and elicit useful language they may know through brainstorming. In the task cycle, learners interact with each other to complete the task. During this stage, Willis recommends that the teacher serves more as a facilitator, allowing the students to

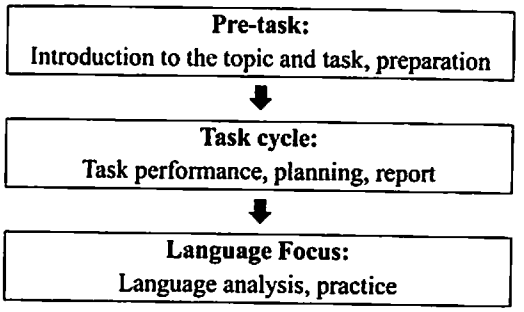

Figure 1: adapted from Willis (1996, p. 52)

complete the task on their own, whilst providing guidance when necessary. Following the task, learners then prepare a report in the L2 on how they completed it, either in written or spoken format. Finally, the language focus stage (or the post-task) is where language learning can occur. The teacher can draw learners' attention to any possible errors made during the task, and introduce new language which learners can then practice and subsequently acquire.

Willis' (1996) structure laid the foundations for a task-based lesson, and since then, numerous task-based studies and course programs have adopted the standard three stage format of 'pre-task - task - post-task' design (Ellis et al., 2020). Given that a task's primary focus is on meaning and language use, learner's attention to language form is therefore important in order for the acquisition of new language to take place (Mochizuki and Ortega, 2008). Schmidt (1990) pointed out that learners' attention needs to be guided towards new linguistic features during communication, in order for learners to 'notice' the features, which is a vital part of acquisition. As we can see in Willis' (1996) framework, attention to form occurs in the final post-task stage, however, other SLA researchers such as Long (1985) favours drawing learner's attention to form during task performance through 'corrective feedback' when learners make mistakes. This can take the form of a teacher 'recasting' a learner's incorrect utterance, to enable noticing and facilitate incidental acquisition.

Attention to form could also occur in the pre-task stage as in Mochizuki and Ortega (2008), who provided grammar guidance in the form of relative clauses

that could assist learners' performance of a narrative task that elicited the structure. In this case though, there is a danger as Ellis (2009b) pointed out, that attention to linguistic forms prior to task performance can cause learners to focus on grammatical accuracy and override their attention on meaning and fluency, and in doing so the task becomes a 'situational grammar exercise' (p. 224). The next section will now discuss evaluating learners' performance of tasks.

Measures to assess task-based performance

Skehan (2021) notes that given the considerable number of task-based studies published over the past thirty years, there has been general consistency in the measures used to assess task-based performance. In terms of L2 production, performance has been distinguished into three aspects; fluency, accuracy and complexity (see table 2):

Table 2: Descriptions of fluency, accuracy and complexity (based on Skehan, 2021, p. 5)

Aspect of L2 Speech	Definition
1. Fluency	The smooth, quick production of language without repair.
2. Accuracy	Greater control of language without error.
3. Complexity	Developmental use of advanced language (structural and lexical).

Skehan (2021) rightly points out that these aspects of L2 performance can, and should be used as measures of development too, and as a result have consequently been used in task-based developmental studies as well (see Thompson, 2014). However, due to the extensive number of studies that have explored the three stages of task-based learning i.e. the 'pre-task stage', the 'task' stage, and the 'post-task' stage, this paper shall focus on the effects of the 'pre-task' stage only.

Pre-task planning

Task planning or pre-task planning has been one of the most researched areas of task-based learning (see for example, Foster and Skehan, 1996, 1999;

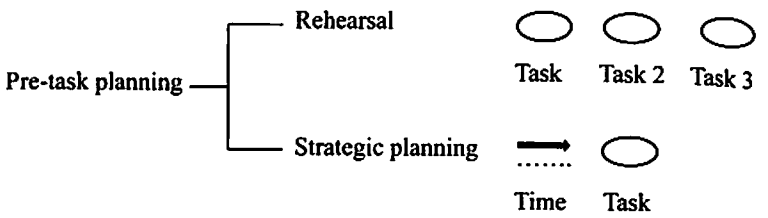

Figure 2: Task planning (adapted from Ellis, 2005, p. 4)

Yuan and Ellis, 2003, Ellis, 2005, 2009a). Studies devoted to this area have been interested to see how planning time can be manipulated to influence learners' L2 speech during task performance. Ellis (2005) notes that "pre-task planning is further divided into *rehearsal* and *strategic* planning" (p. 3). Rehearsal serves as a form of planning by allowing the learner to perform a task prior to a subsequent performance. This is otherwise known as task repetition where learners can repeat the same or similar tasks in an attempt to improve their subsequent performance. Alternatively, 'strategic planning' involves the allocation of planning time prior to task performance where learners can focus on the content or any linguistic aspects necessary to complete the task (see figure 2).

There is also an additional form of planning that can take place *during* task performance; referred to as 'within-task' planning or 'online' planning where learners can think of what to say during their performance (Ellis, 2005). However, given the scope of this paper, a review shall only be devoted to studies examining planning *prior* to task performance i.e. pre-task planning.

Task planning studies have been conducted in various countries around the world with participants of varying nationalities and proficiency levels. In terms of the effects of strategic planning, Skehan (2021) reports that results to date tend to show consistency in their findings; namely that pre-task planning provides gains in fluency and complexity for L2 learners compared with learners that are not afforded planning time. Furthermore, planning seems to be more beneficial when tasks are complex. The pedagogic implications of these findings therefore indicate that L2 learners need time in order to express more complex ideas and meanings. The complexity of their speech may also involve greater use of lan-

guage 'chunks'; that is, larger amounts of linguistic units produced, resulting in less pausing with gains in fluency.

In terms of task repetition as a form of planning, a number of studies have explored its benefits on L2 speech (Bygate, 2001; Lambert et al., 2016). One of the earliest (Bygate, 2001) placed 48 students into groups of three: a narrative group, an interview group, and a control group. Each group performed a narrative task and one interview task. The narrative group would then perform two similar narrative tasks every two weeks over a ten-week duration. The interview group would perform the same procedure with an interview task. On week ten, all the students repeated the same tasks they performed in week one. The results showed significant improvements in learners' fluency and complexity from the repeated task performances. Bygate attributed the gains in speech performance from learners having already performed the cognitive demands of the task in week one, which was then partly stored within their memory. Learners could then access and process the linguistic features necessary to complete the repeated task at a quicker rate, resulting in more fluent and complex speech.

Task sequencing

Robinson (2003, 2010, 2011) has carried out extensive research on the effects of task sequencing on L2 production and development. Although Bygate's (2001) study involved repeating the same or similar tasks, Robinson (2010) formulated a theoretically grounded framework for sequencing tasks, referred to as the Cognition Hypothesis, in order to maximise learner's output and development. Under the Cognition Hypothesis, tasks are sequenced to increase in cognitive complexity, that is "designing and having learners perform tasks simple on all the relevant parameters of task demands first, and then gradually increasing their cognitive complexity on subsequent versions" (p. 242). Sequencing tasks so they increase in complexity can occur by gradually reducing planning time prior to each task performance, thereby increasing the *performance* demands on learners. For example, task one could allow five minutes preparation time, whereas task two could allow two minutes to prepare. Robinson argues that sequencing tasks with a reduction in planning time helps learners to process

information and perform tasks under the normal time conditions of every day communication, essentially speeding up their interlanguage processing systems and advancing their fluency output.

The Cognition Hypothesis also states that tasks can increase in complexity through increasing *linguistic* demands. This can be achieved by placing more elaborate demands on tasks, for example, tasks that require more explanation or reasoning. In doing so, learners are required to produce more complex speech in order to complete the task, as well as paying more attention to the linguistic details of the task. Robinson (2001) argues that sequencing tasks that increase in cognitive complexity serves as "a more powerful influence on production than repetition of task versions" (p. 40). Subsequent task sequencing studies have been designed on the claims of the Cognition Hypothesis, along with guidelines for sequencing tasks, referred to as the SSARC model (see Baralt et al., 2014). The model stipulates that tasks should be sequenced simple at first, in the form of simplistic linguistic demands and the allocation of planning time. Planning time is then reduced followed by an increase in the linguistic demands of subsequent tasks (see figure 3).

The SSARC model studies reported in Baralt et al. (2014) showed that by sequencing tasks in this manner resulted in positive gains in L2 speech in terms of fluency, accuracy and complexity.

In terms of the sections covered so far in this paper, we have seen that task-based learning has emerged from a dissatisfaction with previous teaching approaches that placed an emphasis on teaching linguistic structures, as opposed

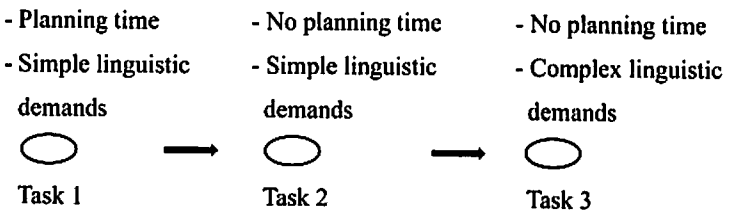

Figure 3: Tasks sequenced according to the Cognition Hypothesis and the SSARC model (adapted from Baralt et al., 2014. p. 17)

to encouraging free language use. We have examined a clear definition of what constitutes a task, and then reviewed how task-based learning should occur within classrooms. From there we have seen how learners' performance of tasks can be improved by providing planning time, and also how learner's L2 oral skills can be developed through sequencing tasks to maximise L2 output. These sections highlight the benefits that TBL can afford in terms of developing learners' L2 communication skills. Despite the potential benefits of TBL, there has however been certain issues implementing the approach, along with CLT in general, particularly within Asian educational contexts. The next section will discuss this matter in detail, along with some potential solutions to the dilemma.

Issues and challenges implementing task-based learning

Littlewood (2007, 2014) points to both cultural and practical issues that can hinder the successful implementation of task-based learning and CLT within language education contexts in Asia. We will discuss each in turn starting with traditional, cultural ideologies towards learning within Asian contexts. Hu (2005) reports that in China "education is conceived more as a process of knowledge accumulation than a process of using knowledge for immediate purposes" (p. 653). Littlewood (2007) adds that "classroom roles and learning strategies which this culture engenders conflict with a learner-centred methodology such as CLT but are highly supportive of a teacher-centred methodology" (p. 245). In Japan, Samimy and Kobayashi (2004) reported of "cultural mismatches between theoretical underpinnings of CLT and the Japanese culture of learning" (p. 253) whereby pedagogy that focuses on a learner-centered approach, interaction and fluency may be met with resistance by some learners who may prefer a more teacher-centered approach and a focus on accuracy and language forms. Although learner perceptions towards language instruction may well have changed in recent years in favor of a more communicative approach, particularly amongst learners at the university level (see for example, Thompson and Jones (2013). However, Mochizuki and Ortega (2008) and Samimy and Kobayashi (2004) also point to educational factors that can hinder successful implementation of TBL within Japanese schools due to university entrance exams that focus on English

knowledge through testing reading and grammar as opposed to communication skills. This creates a washback effect for language teachers to "teach for the test" (p. 253) as the preferred pedagogic approach.

Littlewood (2014) also points to the practical problems of implementing TBL such as large class sizes that are prominent in schools throughout different countries in Asia which can create classroom management issues for teachers in terms of being able to monitor groups performing tasks, controlling students' use of the L2 and minimizing their use of the L1. These issues were particularly evident in Carless (2004) who investigated task-based learning within elementary schools in Hong Kong and noted that students' low-level proficiency made it very challenging for teachers to facilitate L2 production through using tasks. Ellis (2009) noted that "Educational systems in many parts of the world place the emphasis on knowledge-learning rather than skill development, and a task-based approach to language teaching is not readily compatible with such a philosophy. A structural approach based on teaching discrete items of language accords more closely with such an educational philosophy (p. 242)".

Language teaching that is compatible under the umbrella of structural syllabi is typically that of a more traditional method, referred to earlier in this paper as the 'weak' CLT approach, known as "present-practice-produce (PPP)" (Ellis, 2003, p.29). 'Present' refers to instruction of pre-selected language features that can be lexis or grammatical, followed by 'practice' which consists of using the feature in controlled grammar exercises, and finally 'produce' entails using the feature in a communicative context through some sort of activity. PPP falls in line with cognitive accounts of learning, known as skill acquisition theories within the field of cognitive psychology, which attempt to explain how humans acquire skills in general (Anderson, 1993, 1995). According to Anderson et at., (2004), language skills are developed through the same cognitive processes as any other skill, be it learning to play the piano or driving a car. Knowledge is first developed through instruction, referred to as 'declarative knowledge' (1995, p. 308) which typically consists of facts of the skill, and it also involves controlling processing. In the case of language, facts could consist of grammatical rules of the L2, and controlled processing implies that the learner may struggle using the

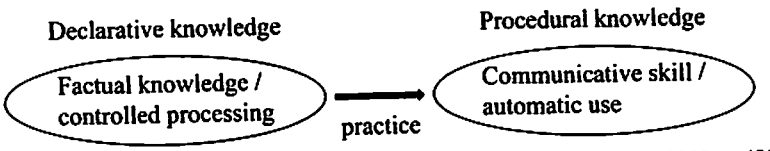

Figure 4: Skill acquisition theories of language learning (adapted from Ellis, 2008, p. 430)

L2 in spontaneous communication. However, declarative knowledge can be transferred into skill and automatic use, referred to as 'procedural skill' through practice (see figure 4). In regards to language, communicative skills are considered to be developed through a process of building up grammatical knowledge and then practising linguistic features to develop automatic use.

The above cognitive accounts of language learning are disputed by some SLA researchers who consider language acquisition to be a unique phenomenon in relation to the development of other skills (Ellis, 2008). For example, (Ellis, 2008, VanPatten, 2004) argue that second languages are not typically acquired through a process of first building up declarative knowledge using explicit instruction followed by the practice of specific linguistic features one at a time. Furthermore, Ellis (2003) notes that "presenting and practising features learners have failed to use correctly in production may not result in their acquisition if learners are not developmentally ready to acquire them" (p.30). In addition, a significant amount of language learning occurs incidentally, which task-based learning facilitates (Ellis et al., 2020). Nevertheless, despite the criticisms levelled at PPP, it still remains as one of the mainstream methods of language instruction throughout the world, and is a common format within foreign language textbooks (Ellis and Shintani, 2014).

Given the issues outlined above with implementing task-based learning within Asia, what possible solutions can there be for the approach that promotes authentic language use? One possible answer could be to create what Ellis at al. (2020) refer to as a "modular curriculum" (p. 25) that incorporates task-based learning with a structural approach using PPP that can also include tasks. The latter, known as task-supported language teaching will now be discussed.

Task-supported language teaching

Tasks have also been used as a means to practice pre-selected linguistic structures in a communicative context, known as task-supported language teaching (Ellis, 2003, p. 146). This approach differs from task-based learning because the primary goal is to practice using a linguistic feature communicatively which therefore violates the first criteria of the definition of a task outlined earlier in this paper. In this context, the task or activity must be designed in a way that it elicits the use of the pre-determined linguistic feature in question. Such tasks are called 'focused' tasks, and they serve as a pedagogic device by allowing learners to practice certain linguistic forms that they may have difficulty using in natural contexts. For example, Mochizuki and Ortega (2008), and later Thompson (2014) designed narrative story telling tasks that elicited the use of relative clauses which are known for their difficulty in production with Japanese learners of English.

Task-supported language teaching, in line with PPP and skill acquisition theories of learning that were discussed in the previous section, is considered compatible according to Littlewood (2014), with educational practices in Asia that may favour more structural approaches to teaching language (see figure 5).

Given task-supported language teaching's compatibility with educational instruction within Asia, Ellis et al. (2020) have suggested that creating a 'modular curriculum' that combines task-supported language teaching with task-based

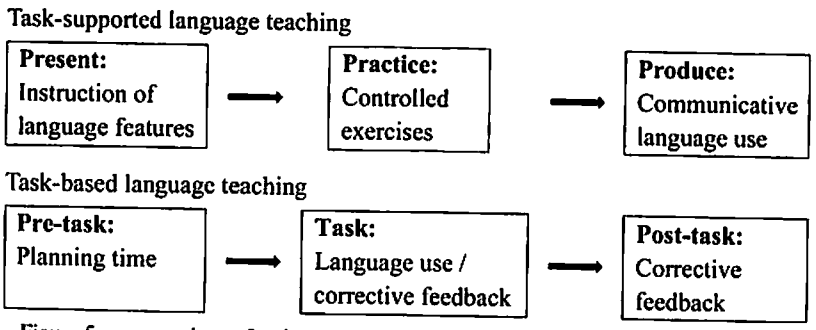

Figure 5: a comparison of task-supported language teaching with task-based learning (adapted from Ellis, 2003, p. 147)

learning could provide a compromise. The former facilitates the practice of specific structures, benefiting accuracy, whilst the latter facilitates authentic language use and fluency development, thus helping to develop learners' communication skills. "The proposal is that there would need to be clear separation in time between the two co-existing approaches (e.g. different days) and that a decision would need to be made whether to start off with a more conventional approach at earlier levels and move towards a task-based approach as proficiency increases or vice-versa" (p. 356). Whether or not both approaches could work in tandem within language educational programs remains to be explored in future research.

Conclusion

This paper has reported on the progress of task-based learning research over the past thirty years as an approach for developing learners' L2 communication skills. Studies have shown how tasks can be designed to improve not only L2 speaking skills, but also input skills that can be applied to learners of lower proficiency. Research has also shown how tasks can be used in different ways by providing planning time that benefits learners' L2 performance. Guidelines have also been put forward to assist instructors on how to sequence tasks to develop language skills over time.

The learner-centred, communicative nature of task-based learning has however, created certain challenges and issues regarding its implementation within Asian educational contexts. This may lead to the approach aligning with task-supported language teaching which appears more compatible with instructional practices in Asia. In doing so, task-based learning and task-supported language teaching would need to be implemented separately within an educational program, possibly determined by proficiency levels of the courses, and requiring different roles from language instructors. As both approaches argue their case for developing language skills, it remains to be seen how they could potentially compliment each other within language programs.

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