8 *The role of the teacher in task-based language teaching*[1]

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1 Introduction

In task-based language teaching (TBLT), the teacher can be regarded in many ways as the learners' most privileged interlocutor. Although the teacher's role in TBLT differs from the role teachers assume in more 'linguistic', structure-oriented approaches, it is equally crucial. In this article, we will describe what the role of the teacher in TBLT can be, taking examples from primary, secondary and adult education. In Chapter 9 of this volume, which specifically draws on classroom observations in kindergarten, the role of the teacher is further explored.

In a nutshell, we will argue and illustrate that there are two core actions that we believe the teacher should take in order for tasks to elicit rich learner activity and to enhance the chances that this activity turns into actual learning. These are:

a motivating the learner to invest intensive mental energy in task completion;
b interactionally supporting task performance in such a way as to trigger processes such as the negotiation of meaning and content, the comprehension of rich input, the production of output and focus on form, which are believed to be central to (second) language learning.

These two actions should be central throughout the three stages that we can distinguish when describing teacher activity: the planning stage, the performance stage and the post-task assessment stage. In this article, we will use the term 'planning stage' for all the mental and physical actions teachers take in preparation of the actual educational activity that will take place. During the planning stage, teachers will have to assess to what extent the task they are preparing, whether taken from a syllabus or developed by themselves, has the potential to motivate the learners into meaningful action and to elicit the kind of cognitive and interactional processes assumed to

enhance language learning. At this stage, four questions suggested by Breen (1987: 25), may come in handy for the teacher to assess the task's potential:

1 What is the objective of the task? e.g. What particular skills will be/should be developed; what particular forms may be/should be attended to? Are objectives mainly in terms of accuracy, fluency or complexity? Are task objectives adapted to learners' needs?
2 What is the content of the task? e.g. Is the topic content familiar or unfamiliar to the learners? Is the topic likely to interest the learners?
3 How is the task to be carried out? e.g. Will learners engage in planning before the task?
4 In what situation is the task to be carried out? e.g. Will the learners work in pairs or groups or will they perform the task individually?

During the performance phase of the educational activity, the above-mentioned interactional and cognitive processes believed to enhance language learning are supposed to actually take place, and much of the teacher action will consist of drawing out the most of the task's potential for groups of learners and individual learners respectively. In the post-activity stage, the teacher, preferably together with the learners, will evaluate to what extent everyone was actually engaged in meaningful activity and whether there are any objective and/or subjective data available that indicate whether the activity was effective in terms of planned or unplanned language learning outcomes.

Obviously, the above-mentioned boundaries between planning, performing and assessing are to a great extent artificial. Both planning and evaluating also take place during the performance phase i.e. when the teacher is involved in setting up interaction with the learners. In addition, the sequence of these three stages should be interpreted in cyclical terms, rather than in strictly linear terms. Post-task assessment will often be the primary basis on which the planning of new tasks and activities is founded.

Throughout these stages of educational activity, the teacher and the learners will have to take into account and react to an array of local contextual conditions. These include, among others, particular characteristics of the learners (age, level of proficiency, needs, interests, status, etc.), characteristics of the teacher (subjective theories and beliefs, years of experience, etc.), features of the classroom environment (number of learners, available tools and syllabuses, etc.), policy regulations (curriculum, national exams, school regu-

lations, official timetables), time pressure and links with the outside world (e.g. parental demands, societal pressure).

We will build up this chapter by discussing a number of case studies of teachers whom we have observed while they were working with tasks. Our primary starting point for the discussion of these cases will be the actions the teachers take in terms of motivating the language learners (section 2) and supporting the learners' cognitive and interactional activity (section 3). We will integrate the teachers' handling of contextual conditions and going through the planning, performance and assessment stages of educational activity in our discussions of these same cases. Most of the examples we will use come out of primary education, though we believe the ideas we raise about the role of the teacher in this chapter can be inspiring for other contexts, such as secondary and adult education.

2 Motivating the language learner

In task-based syllabuses, learners are confronted with meaningful tasks. However, in the real-life classroom, this latter statement is not a fact, it is a hypothesis. To some degree, learners themselves decide to what extent they will actually engage with the task and perceive it as meaningful (Coughlan & Duff, 1994; Donato, 2000; Murphy, 2003). In classrooms where 20 or more learners are gathered, some learners may merely 'go through the motions' without investing any mental energy in the task. They may receive a copy of a newspaper article from the teacher, hear them deliver the instructions to read the article and solve the questions, wait for the task-performance phase to pass, passively witness the post-task phase during which the answers are collectively discussed ('collectively' standing for interaction between the teacher and the most assertive or brightest students), and then close books like all the others. Breen (1987) calls this passive attitude the 'survival orientation'. He contrasts this with an 'achievement orientation', which drives the learner to perform the task with maximal effort. If it is true that the effect of learning activities is, at least partly, dependent on the intensity with which the learner approaches them (Laevers, 2000; Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001), one of the most prominent roles of the teacher is to try and get every single learner involved into actively engaging with the task that is presented.

This is a role for the teacher throughout a task-based lesson. Clearly, the introductory phase may be crucial in this respect (for more details on the stages in a task-based lesson, see Chapter 4 in this volume). Even if the syllabus-designer has taken care to develop tasks

that might interest the learners, it is up to the teacher to bring the task alive at the beginning of the lesson, in order to ensure that the students mentally construe the task in such a way that they can set clear and relevant goals for themselves and are launched into action as a result (Ames & Ames, 1989; Coughlan & Duff, 1994; Dörnyei, 2002). The goals the learners set for themselves need not necessarily be identical to the goals the teacher has in mind. In some interpretations of task-based language education, such as the process syllabus (Breen, 1987; Candlin, 1987) or the negotiated syllabus (Nunan, 1988), the goals themselves may be negotiated or constructed together with the learners, but even in the latter case, variation between individual learners in terms of goal-setting will be likely and substantial. What is crucial, however, from a task-based perspective, is that learners set a goal for themselves that motivates them to engage in an achievement orientation and in meaningful interaction, for this is what will promote their language development in the short and the long term.

We will illustrate how teachers can enhance this kind of achievement orientation with an example of a task taken from a Flemish task-based syllabus for Dutch as a first and second language. In this task, the pupils of the fourth year of primary education (10-year-olds) are asked to read a tourist brochure of a fictitious island called Palindria in order to find out whether the island would be a nice place for children to visit. Afterwards, in a second task, the pupils are asked to write a tourist brochure about their own country. In terms of Breen's above-mentioned questions guiding the teacher's planning stage, the syllabus guidelines in Figures 1 and 2 make a number of suggestions with regard to these two tasks.

During his preparation of this activity, Teacher M, whom we videotaped, decided to develop some personal initiative in order to further raise the children's enthusiasm for the reading task. He wrote a letter, which he put in an envelope and stuck to the blackboard before class began. When the children entered the classroom in the morning, their curiosity was aroused by the mysterious envelope on the blackboard. At the beginning of the performance phase, Teacher M walked up to the blackboard, opened the envelope and read the letter aloud (T = Teacher/P = pupil):

T: There are a few children here who have asked me: 'What's that letter doing there?' (takes the letter) Well, I got this letter on Friday, and it says: 'To teacher Marc and the . . . (shows the letter to a pupil)
P: Fourth year
T: 'The pupils of the fourth year . . . Van Steemansstraat' (shows the letter to the pupils)
P: 25. België

Main objective	• The pupils' Dutch reading comprehension skills are further developed, particularly with regard to the reading of 'scientific' texts. • The pupils' attention is focused on a specified list of vocabulary items. • Pupils build up knowledge about the function and form of brochures. • Pupils experience that texts are written with a particular intention and goal.
Topic	• The fictitious island of Palindria: is it an interesting place for children? • Topic likely to arouse children's curiosity.
Task procedures led by the teacher	• First the teacher has an introductory talk with the pupils about tourist brochures, making use of a few real examples. • Next, the pupils individually read the tourist brochure about Palindria. • The teacher discusses the meaning of unfamiliar words and target words (as listed in the syllabus guidelines) with the children. • The teacher has a discussion with the class about the contents of the brochure. • The teacher builds the bridge to the next task.
Situation	• Classical discussion and individual reading.

Figure 1 Objectives, topic, procedures and situational guidelines of a task for primary education called 'A brochure from Palindria'. (From: *Toren van Babbel*, Wolters/Plantyn)

P: 1100
T: (together with the pupils) 'Belgium'
P: België
T: 'Belgium'
P: So that's a letter from another country.
P: That's from Ireland or so.
T: Yes, it might come from abroad ... I will do exactly the same as on Friday. You will see why. I opened the letter ... and I read: (opens the letter and reads aloud) 'Palindria, 3 March 1996.' Palindria? (looks at the children with amazement). 'Hi, my name is Tosca Mecuenge and I live in Palindria. I am ten years old and we want to find an exchange class. That means we will come to Belgium for a week, and you will come and visit Palindria for a week. What? Don't you know my country? Well, what a coincidence, I don't know much about Belgium either. I have already helped you. I have inserted brochures about my country in the envelope.

Greetings. Tosca. p.s. I have dark skin, two brothers and three sisters and I love reading and I have very long hair.' (turning back to the pupils) Can you imagine how amazed I was? Palindria! Have you ever heard of it?

P: It does not exist!

Main objective	• The pupils' Dutch functional writing skills are further developed, particularly with regard to the writing of brochures. • The pupils' attention is drawn to the fact that texts are written with a particular intention and goal. • The pupils develop their skills with regard to structuring information in a text.
Topic	• The children's own country or a non-existing, fictitious country, more particularly, the things that children can do in that country
Task procedures led by the teacher	• First the teacher and the class discuss a number of features of the text the pupils are about to write: length, lay-out, etc. • Next, the pupils write their text, working in pairs. • The teacher walks around, helping and supporting the children's writing process, and drawing attention to the goal and function of the text that they are writing: convincing and charming the readers. • Teacher provides feedback, after which the pairs finish the final version of their text and show it and read it aloud to the other pupils of the class.
Situation	• Classical discussion and pair work.

Figure 2 Objectives, topic, procedures and situational guidelines of a task for primary education called 'Writing a brochure yourself'. (From: *Toren van Babbel*, Wolters/Plantyn)

The teacher's plan of raising the children's commitment appears to be successful. The children are intrigued by the letter and by the two tasks to which it refers: reading Tosca's brochure about Palindria and writing a tourist brochure for her about their own country in return. The children are quite aware that this is all fiction, but nevertheless, they open up to the world of mysterious islands and world tours. This is illustrated by the next excerpt, recorded a few minutes later:

T: Tosca asks you … I'll take her letter once again (reads aloud). 'What? Don't you know my country? Well, what a coincidence, I don't know much about Belgium either.'

P: Then we have to write back to her.

T: What did you say?
P: Then we have to write back to her.
T: Yes!

The fact that a pupil, and not the teacher, decides that they should write a letter (with a brochure) underscores the children's strong involvement and illustrates their personal construction of the task. Some of the pupils clearly prefer to write a brochure about a fictitious island, rather than about Belgium. Since writing an informative and appealing brochure is the main goal of the lesson (and not learning about the geography of Belgium), the teacher decides to give in to this request in order to foster the children's motivation for the writing task. He also allows them to work in pairs, which the children find more agreeable than tackling the relatively complex writing task on their own.

T: OK this morning we spoke about Palindria. The brochure of Palindria. So we decided together that this afternoon we would design a brochure of our country, or our own city, or you can even invent a country yourself. Right?
Pupils: (enthusiastically) Yes!

Raising the learners' enthusiasm for the task, arousing their curiosity, negotiating lesson content together with them in order to make sure that they will be willing to invest mental energy in performing the tasks they are given and developing an 'achievement orientation', is not confined to the introductory phase of the lesson. It is a task the teacher faces throughout all stages of task performance. Some tasks may be embarked upon by the learners with great initial enthusiasm, but if the tasks appear to be challenging or take much time to solve, learners may become demotivated, disinterested and may even 'drop out'. According to Winne & Marx (1989), learners, while engaged in a task, continuously appraise the progress they have made towards the intended outcome. When progress is slow, halting or backslides, intervention of some kind or a change of plan is needed to the rescue the situation. Winne & Marx refer to this as 'action control processes'. If learners do not succeed in self-regulating these action control processes, the influence of interactional partners may be decisive.

Teachers, then, should try to keep learners going and stimulate them to persist, even when the task appears to be more difficult or demanding than was first believed. Positive feedback is one of the major tools the teacher can use when affectively supporting learners during the task-performance phase. For instance, in the excerpt below, Joris and Mohammed, two pupils in teacher M's class, have

enthusiastically started writing their brochure to Tosca. They have decided to invent an island. Teacher M, circulating between the different pupil groups, kneels down to see what they have come up with:

J: Moris! Moris!
T: Boris! The country's called Boris?
J: Moris!
T: Moris? Hmm, sounds nice.
J: The 'Mo' of Mohammed and 'Ris' of Joris.
T: Hey, did you make that up yourselves? Great, write it down!
J: The country Moris.
T: That sounds very good.
J: Yes but with a 'h' like in Mohammed.

The teacher's positive feedback reassures the pupils that they are coping with the task in a very satisfactory manner. In this way, their own appraisal of the progress they are making and of their chances of being able to complete the task may be enhanced as well.

3 Supporting language learners

Tasks invite the learner to do purposeful things with language: reading the instructions to fold a plane and carrying them out, writing a letter to the mayor in order to ask for safer school surroundings, asking for road directions, listening to a radio newsreel in order to find out what is happening in the world (see also Chapters 3, 4 and 5 in this volume). These tasks demand a complex interplay of mental operations, all of which have to be performed in an integrated manner. For language learners, many of these mental operations may cause obstacles or difficulties, especially when tasks are supposed to be above the level of the learner's language proficiency. One of the teacher's main roles in TBLT, then, will be to support the learner in order to cope with the linguistic and cognitive problems he meets during task performance and to do this in such a way that the learner learns from it i.e. learns something new that can aid him to perform the same or a similar task better in the future.

3.1 Planned interventions

During the planning stage, teachers can build up insights into the task's language learning potential, the obstacles their students are likely to meet when performing the task and possible ways to react should these obstacles arise. These insights will be more accurate if the teacher's analysis of the task is thorough and the teacher's know-

ledge of the learners' actual level of proficiency detailed. For instance, for the majority of teacher M's pupils, the Palindria reading comprehension task was bound to raise problems of vocabulary, because many of the pupils were likely to be unfamiliar with particular geographical terms ('mountainous', 'climate', 'inland') that were deliberately used in the brochure by the syllabus designer in order to promote the acquisition of new (academic) vocabulary. These words may assume a prominent place in the performance phase, more particularly when the class is discussing whether Palindria would be a nice place for children to visit. As such, the focal attention paid to the meaning of the words deliberately inserted by the syllabus designer can be functionally embedded in a meaningful discussion (Van den Branden, 2005).

Another fine example of how the planning stage can inspire and guide teachers in providing interactional support during the performance stage is described by Samuda (2001). In her study, the teacher confronted her low-intermediate second language learners of English with a task that stimulated meaningful communication and discussion: the learners were asked to speculate on a person's identity on the basis of the contents of his pockets. The task was based around epistemic modality, derived from the area of meaning between 'yes' and 'no', and hence, presumably giving rise to the use of the modal auxiliaries 'must', 'might', 'may' and 'could'. In view of the fact that the students in the teacher's group had not as yet mastered these modals, drawing attention to the use of these specific verbs constituted one of the objectives of the activity. In their group interactions during the first phase of task performance, the students were found not to use any of the above-mentioned modal verbs. When the students presented their work to the rest of the class, the teacher first implicitly incorporated modal verbs in her feedback, but this did not lead to their use by the students, probably because they were concentrating entirely on understanding the teacher and on getting across their own meaning. The teacher then decided to interrupt the meaning exchange and to focus briefly and explicitly on form: she explained in very simple terms when modals like 'must' and 'may' can be used to express degrees of probability.

> T: ... Hmm, let's, why don't we look at how the language works here? Just for a minute uhh (looking at objects). Let's see now. Did you have anything here you thought was 'probable'? Like 90%?
> Y: Businessman.
> T: Businessman. 90%. OK. So you're 90% certain he's a businessman, right? Here's another way to say this. You think it's 90%

> certain, so you think he must be a businessman. He must be a businessman (writes it on board). (Samuda, 2001: 131)

The learners actively participated in this focus-on-form-episode. After this short explicit interlude, the focus on meaning was taken up again, giving the learners the chance immediately to make use of the forms that they had been alerted to. In this phase of the lesson, the researcher did find spontaneous instances of the students using modals.

3.2 Unplanned interventions

Learners construct their own version of the tasks they are faced with. For all the careful planning and manipulation of task features that can be carried out before the actual task performance phase, learners still have a strong say in what particular course the interaction elicited by the task will take, what particular forms they will attend to and how much negotiation of meaning there will be (Breen, 1987; Foster, 1998; Machado de Almeida Mattos, 2000; Murphy, 2003). Especially in tasks that elicit pair and group work, much depends on the objectives the interlocutors together assign to the task they are confronted with and the collaborative dialogue they build up together (Swain and Lapkin, 2001). The task in process may run in completely different directions from the task as a workplan.

In the example below, a young child (G) is telling the story of a popular television show he watched during the weekend. The show is about a dog called Samson and his boss, Gert, who live together in a house that is frequented by their friends (e.g. the mayor, Alberto the hairdresser, etc.). While retelling the story, G gets very excited:

G: Yes, and, and that dog Samson had a crocodile, and he he he put it on an iron and then it was broke, and then the mayor, he, no, no, he called to ask about such a crocodile, but no, no, first to Albert, Albertooo, and and, he didn't have one, and then to the mayor, and then yes yes, then there was crawling a real one . . .
T: Oh I see, but wait, tell me G, you told me Samson had a crocodile, was that a real, a real crocodile?
G: No, a plastic one.
T: And, what happened to the plastic one? Did Samson put that crocodile on an iron . . .
G: No, Gert.
T: Ah Gert, I see.
G: Yes, and Samson kept crying, because his crocodile was gone.
T: I see, and that's why, and then Gert called the mayor.

G: No, first Alberto.
T: To ask him whether they had such a crocodile too, right?
G: Yes, yes, but Alberto did not have one, and he said, I will give the mayor a call, and then, yes, Alberto asked the mayor for a real crocodile.
T: But the mayor, I am sure he did not have a real crocodile?
G: No, but he knew someone who did.
T: Oh no!
G: Yes, yes, and that person put a crocodile.
T: A real one?
G: Yes, he put it in a case, and he brought to it Samson's and Gert's house.
T: Jesus! (Van den Branden, 1998; our translation)

G's initial account of the story is very confusing. He only seems to have very basic linguistic resources at his disposal to reconstruct the story: his vocabulary is basic, his sentences are short and often incomplete. His major problem, however, is how to reconstruct the story line in a clear and coherent manner, such that it can be mentally reconstructed by someone who has not seen the show. His account is full of gaps and mental leaps: too much information remains implicit. The teacher uses this opportunity to provide G with implicit feedback on this lack of coherence. He acts like a genuine listener in this excerpt. He does not even have to pretend that he cannot follow (as teachers often must), because he did not see the show and is really interested in what G has to tell. His interventions are clearly goal-directed and meaning-focused: by asking questions, he makes clear at what points G's initial account was vague or incomprehensible. For instance, the fact that G did not explicitly describe the difference between the plastic and the real crocodile made his account incomprehensible. This is one of the first issues the teacher brings to the surface.

The teacher does not explicitly correct G's formal errors: for instance, in the original Dutch version, G uses an incorrect simple past tense of the verb 'to crawl', but the teacher ignores it, probably because he fears that explicitly correcting or discussing this error would distract G from his focus on meaning and might demotivate him from further participating in the conversation. In other words, the teacher keeps focusing on the essence of the speaking task: getting across a story line in a clear and coherent manner. Implicitly, the teacher hopes that this conversation may alert G to the fact that things that are clear inside his head are not necessarily clear in the listener's head. Mediating between the demands of the task and the learner's level of language proficiency, the teacher puts the initiative for solving comprehension problems, running the conversation and

initiating the topic into the hands of the learner. In fact, through acting as a cooperative and genuinely interested listener, he succeeds in offering interactional support that strengthens the learner's initiative and mental effort, rather than reducing it or taking it away.

This is also the case in the excerpt below, where the teacher and a young NNS child are having a conversation about a story that the child has listened to. The story is a chapter from a famous Dutch book about the young boy Pluk, who lives all alone in a building called the Petteflet, where he spends a lot of time with his animal friends. The young NNS child's Dutch second language proficiency is relatively low compared to the other children in the class, so the teacher uses this conversation for two ends: to give the child a chance to develop her speaking proficiency by speaking (Swain, 1985; 1995) and to prepare her for the next episode in the story that will be read to the children the next day.

T: Oh no, that's not good, is it, the Tortelgarden will have to disappear. All the trees have to go away, and then the little mice won't have a place to live.
P: No, bu . . . bu . . . Pluk won't let them.
T: No, that's right. But what do you think he could do, what could Pluk do to make sure that all the animals can stay in the garden?
P: I don't know.
T: Neither do I . . . Just imagine that you were Pluk, and you were asked to help. What would you do?
P: (*long silence; she is thinking*)
T: What would you do?
P: Do the mice away.
T: Where?
P: Hmm. . . to the Pettefet.
T: Hmm, that sounds like a good idea. You could take the mice to the Pettefet. But all the other animals living there, the birds, the squirrels and the butterflies.
P: (points at drawing). There's butterflies.
T: Yes, and they live in the Tortelgarden too. Would you take the butterflies to the Petteflet too?
P: Yes.
T: And the hedgehog too?
P: . . . No, but tha . . . Madame Helle won't let them.
T: Oh no, you are right. Madame Helle won't have animals living in the Petteflet. So if Pluk brings all these animals with him, then Madame Helle is going to complain to the porter, and then maybe Pluk himself will have to . . .
P: Go.
T: Go, yes. And Pluk wouldn't want that, would he?
P: No.

T: What else could Pluk do? Can he do something else? … I don't know. Have you got another idea?
P: Ang …
T: Hmmm?
P: Beang
T: What did you say? Be angry?
P: Yes.
T: Oh I see, yes, that is not a bad idea at all. Be angry. But whom does he have to be angry with?
P: The men.
T: Oh I agree, the men who want to do away with the Tortelgarden. Would you do that, would you have the courage?
P: No.
T: No. But Pluk might. You know what, next time we will read on in the book, and then we will find out, whether Pluk will be angry with these naughty men. (Unpublished research by Van den Branden)

The teacher's interactional style in the excerpt is very responsive. She follows the child's lead, picks up what she says and expands on her ideas. The teacher uses recasts, confirmation requests, clarification requests and extensions to subtly, and mainly implicitly, insert form-focused feedback into her meaningful replies (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Muranoi, 1996, 2000; Ortega, forthcoming; Wells, 1985). In doing so, she shows that she is genuinely interested in the child's ideas and, at the same time, provides her with a lot of salient input and feedback. Many of the teacher's contributions produce the more complex and correct versions of what the child wanted to say. Both from an affective and from a linguistic point of view, then, the teacher's interactional support may be claimed to be of high value for fostering the child's language acquisition. At the same time, the whole conversation stimulates the child's general cognitive development: the teacher challenges her to think of solutions to a complex problem and to evaluate the implications of the solutions she suggests.

This is a very good example of how some of the teacher's interventions may simultaneously work towards a complex cluster of educational goals. This complexity actually contrasts with the simpleness and naturalness of her interventions. At first sight, the teacher is just having a pleasant and rewarding conversation with the child, tuning into whatever fascinates the child and making sure that the child is provided ample space to nominate the topic, verbalize her thoughts and experiment with ideas and language. All this is strongly reminiscent of Wells' main conclusions of the Bristol study into first language acquisition (Wells, 1985: 415–16). In this study, the parents whose children acquired language most smoothly and rapidly:

> were not concerned to give systematic linguistic instruction but rather to ensure that conversations with their children were mutually rewarding. They assumed that, when their child spoke, he or she had something to communicate, so they tried to work out what it was and, wherever possible, to provide a response that was meaningful and relevant to the child, and that invited a further contribution. By employing strategies that enabled their children to participate more fully and successfully in conversation, these parents sustained their children's motivation to communicate and this, in turn, increased their opportunities to discover the means for realizing their communicative intentions more effectively.

In a similar vein, Van Avermaet (1995: 265), in a Flemish article about the role of the teacher in TBLT, admits:

> Quite regularly, I ask myself the question why we, as teachers . . . , upon entering a classroom, shut a door behind our back, not only in a literal, but also in a figurative sense? Why do I partly lose, ignore or deny the conversational skills of the spontaneous interlocutor, supporter and mediator, that I have acquired as an adult? A fond embrace between the world inside the classroom, and the world outside, is definitely worth considering.

3.3 Striking a balance between teacher initiative and learner initiative

Just like parents, teachers can be the 'more knowledgeable' partner of the learner without always having to display their expertise overtly and explicitly (Lantolf & Aljaafreh, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978). In the excerpt below (taken from Van der Aalsvoort & Van der Leeuw, 1992: 88–9), students of the first year of secondary education have been working together in groups of three during a content-based lesson activity. The lesson is supposed to offer the pupils the opportunity to explore the topic of reproduction in nature through a series of problem-solving activities and, at the same time, provide the pupils with a chance to develop their academic speaking skills by verbalizing their hypotheses and trains of thought. Three students: A, B and C have observed a small water animal through a microscope, but are now facing a scientific mystery (T = teacher):

T: You are quiet. What have you discovered so far?
A: Well, we have reached the conclusion . . . that when the pool dries up . . .

the little animal also dries up, because the animal is made of water. Mostly water.

T: Well, if that happens, that would be very strange … because the animal lives in the pool… and when the pool dries up the next year again, where do all these new generations of little animals come from? I mean, if your little animals dry up together with the pool, that would mean they die.

B: Well, I think, it will probably have to do with repro … reproducing, when it when it, when there is enough water and … then when it … puts something, something half living and half dead in dried mud than it will be …

C: It could lay eggs or something … Then

T : That's a good idea, you mean that it lays eggs when it is still wet.

B: And then she keeps them in a shell and then when the water returns, they break open.

T: That's one possibility. Now, did you learn about another way when you were learning about different animals, that … survive hardship, you know, surviving the winter or periods without food. What else can animals do?

The teacher's opening intervention in the excerpt shows that he is aware that the students are facing a problem. The identification of the problem will very often constitute the first phase in a task-based mediation. Sometimes the teacher can point to a problem, but in other cases, as in the excerpt above, the students can be asked to verbalize their problem themselves. This might help them to focus more sharply on their problem. At the same time, this might promote their speaking proficiency. In the example above, the problem is not only identified, the teacher and the students also attempt to solve it together. The teacher does not solve the students' problem right away, for instance by starting to give a lecture about theories of reproduction. Rather, the teacher 'nudges' (Lynch, 1997) the learners towards a further exploration of the problem and towards finding possible solutions to it. He does this by challenging their theories (in his second intervention), by giving them hints on where they can find additional useful information or by guiding their train of thought (last intervention), but also by giving them positive feedback to the fruitful ideas they come up with (third intervention). In contrast with the first excerpt we discussed, the teacher in the 'reproduction excerpt' feigns ignorance to a certain extent: obviously he knows the solution to the pupils' problem, but he pushes it aside in order to share the collaborative dialogue. Still the expert (and acknowledged as such by the pupils), the teacher uses his knowledge in a very strategic way: he uses it not to give clear-cut answers, but to ask well-chosen questions that guide the learners' active knowledge construction.

This is further illustrated in Van den Branden's study (1997; 2000a) into the effects of negotiation of meaning on second language acquisition, that involved two pedagogical experiments. In these experiments, the interaction conditions in which the teacher was involved turned out to have the strongest effect on the students' comprehension of input and production of output (see also Chapter 4 in this volume). In the first experiment, 10-year-old pupils were asked to read a Dutch detective story consisting of a number of chapters. After each chapter, an individual comprehension test was administered. The pupils read the chapters in various conditions:

a individual reading of a baseline version;
b individual reading of a premodified version;
c reading of the baseline version + negotiating about the meaning of difficult words and phrases with a peer;
d reading of the baseline version + lockstep negotiation with the teacher.

Condition (d) had the strongest effect on the individual students' level of comprehension. Not only was the fact that comprehension problems could be discussed with a more knowledgeable partner crucial, but so was the way in which the negotiation was organized by the teacher:

> One explanation for the positive results in this condition might lie in the difficulty of the text. In other words, the assistance of only one other pupil or of a priori made input modifications may, for many subjects, not have sufficed to solve all, or the most important, comprehension problems. During the collective negotiation, pupils were looking for the meaning of unfamiliar input collectively, with the researcher (teacher) taking care that the more reticent and less proficient pupils also participated in the negotiation process.
>
> (Van den Branden, 2000a: 437)

This, again, points to the importance of the pupils' active involvement in solving the problems they meet during task performance. Van den Branden (2000a) points to additional advantages of the teacher's interactional support. First, the teacher's participation guaranteed that the pupils arrived at the correct meaning of a word or phrase: whenever the pupils came up with incorrect hypotheses, which they very often did, the teacher intervened to put them back on the right track by way of subtle hints or negative feedback. Swain & Lapkin (2001) have argued that teacher feedback may be crucial in terms of solving learner uncertainty or pointing out incorrect

solutions. Secondly, the teacher also supported the pupils on the affective level, for instance, by preventing them from giving up searching too soon (cf. the role of motivation and persistence discussed in section 2).

The second experiment in the same study (Van den Branden, 1997: 618) involved a speaking task, built around an information gap task, in which the students had to describe drawings to the teacher. A pre-test–post-test design was set up, aimed at studying whether the teacher–student interaction had any effect on the pupils' subsequent individual performance of the same speaking task. This proved to be the case. The students' descriptions in the post-test were significantly longer than those in the pre-test and were of a higher quality: the students offered more of the essential information that was in the drawings and used a wider vocabulary. While interacting with the students, the teacher's interactional style had again been very responsive. The teacher followed the lead of the students, refraining from immediately imposing his viewpoint when they failed to come up with certain information. As the excerpt below shows, the teacher started negotiations with relatively general clarification questions, leaving much space for explorative thinking by the students. Only when it became apparent that the student needed further support, did the teacher's guidance become more explicit and directive e.g. through the use of suggestive confirmation requests (S = student; T = teacher):

S: And then she gets off her bike.
T: Why? Why does she get off her bike?
S: Don't know. She is home, I guess.
T: Home, you say? Can you see her house, or her front door?
S: No, just a churchyard.
T: Hmm strange place to live, if you ask me.
S: (*laughs*).
T: But, but if she's not home yet, why does she get off her bike then?
S: Don't know (*long silence*).
T: There's no clue in the picture?
S: (*after another long silence*) No.
T: Is, uhm, is there something wrong with her bike?
S: No . . . Oh yes, now I see. She's got a flat tyre.
T: Aah, a flat tyre. That must be it.

3.4 Providing different support to different learners

When adopting a responsive interactional style, teachers will naturally differentiate between the different learners in their classroom:

they will adapt the quantity and quality of their interactional support to the learners' specific needs. This is clearly a point in the educational process where the teacher takes over from the syllabus. Fine-tuning feedback and support to learners is, and will probably remain, a human privilege. It cannot be delegated to skilfully designed courses or flashy multimedia materials. The interlocutor has the power to listen and observe, to ask questions, give advice, raise suggestions, assess reactions and adapt all these actions 'online' all the time. The teacher may even decide to adapt learning goals to whatever is learnable (whatever the learner is ready for) 'on the spot'.

All this implies that in classrooms where many students are gathered, and the teacher's time and energy to interactionally support learners are limited, two basic choices will have to be made: the first choice has to do with which learners will be supported to which extent, the second choice has to do with the particular support that will be given to each of the learners or groups. Let us return to teacher M's classroom where the students have now started writing their tourist brochure for Tosca in groups of two. Teacher M is circulating. He has chosen to give the most support to those who need it the most and to allow the pupils who are coping well with the task to work on their own. A and T, for instance, have been discussing the name of their invented island for almost five minutes. When M passes them for the second time, he urges them to get on with the real task i.e. writing the brochure.

T: Are you still looking for a name?
Pupils: Yes!
T: Come on, pick one now!

Other pupils need exactly the opposite kind of support: they have to be praised for the fact they are making such good progress. Still other students may find it hard to get their thoughts organized well on paper. The syllabus guidelines point the teacher to the fact that, faced with the task of writing a tourist brochure, many 10-year-old children will probably have difficulties meeting the demands of the genre, such as organizing information in coherent paragraphs. For instance, F and E have been working very hard, but have only produced a page full of deletions and crossing-out after 15 minutes.

T: Would this be a nice folder?
F: No!
E: No.
T: What would you do to . . .
E: It's just a first draft.

T: So, how are you going to do the final version? Do you have any ideas to make it nicer?
F: With bold letters!
E: Yes.
T: Yes! But you are going to do that later? Now you're just writing down all your thoughts?

A little while later, teacher M returns to these two pupils. They have started writing their final version. M's interventions are now of a different nature: they become slightly more directive, because he notices that F and E have not yet succeeded in structuring the information in a clear and coherent way:

T: So maybe this we could describe as what the island looks like . . .
And this is about the main attractions. You could take the folder of Palindria as an example (takes the folder). 'Beautiful country', 'The weather'. Have you written something about the weather?
F: No.
T: Or about food?
E: Yes! Right here!
T: It doesn't have to be exactly the same as this one (shows the folder). You might do something completely different. I'll show you another folder (*the teacher fetches some other folders*).

This excerpt shows that teacher M tries to adapt the degree to which, and the way in which, he intervenes in the students' task performance to their level of success in reaching the task's crucial language learning goals. In another lesson we observed, students of the third year of primary education were writing a letter of complaint to a toy firm. After the teacher had been circulating for a long while and most of the students had finished their first draft, the teacher stopped the task performance phase and asked some of the students to read aloud their letters. The teacher then used this phase to alert the students to the fact that all their letters lacked some crucial information. Through a joint evaluation of the letters that were read aloud, the students discovered the problem and then resumed their final draft. Collective brainstorms, temporarily interrupting task performance, may be used to reflect explicitly on the process of task performance or to focus on form, particularly those forms that are crucial for the performance of the task.

3.5 The teacher as intruder?

Teachers face a difficult choice in deciding whether or not to intervene when a student or pupil is performing a task. They have to make this decision on the basis of their own perception of the goals

of the task, the goals their students have set for themselves, how far the students have progressed with a particular task and they have to bear in mind the details of their students' needs and personalities. Some of the decisions that teachers actually take in this respect, even though they are inspired by the best intentions, may be said, from a task-based perspective, to have the opposite effect. A number of classroom observations we conducted as inservice trainers and a number of classroom interaction studies that were conducted in Flemish schools (e.g. Devlieger *et al.*, 2003; Devlieger & Goossens, 2004; Linsen, 1994; Lison *et al.*, 2002; see also Chapter 10 in this volume) revealed that, in supporting task performance, teachers often exhibit the following patterns:

a *Solving problems themselves instead of stimulating the students to do so*. For instance, teachers often (mis)use the introductory pre-task phase for these purposes. For example, they start explaining all the difficult words in a text or read the text aloud before the students are allowed to read it for comprehension. Or in order to prepare their students to perform a writing task, teachers put a complete and detailed scheme of the text on the blackboard, reducing the writing task to a gap-exercise. Or they immediately provide the correct answer when the pupils fail to find crucial information in a reading comprehension task. These patterns can typically be observed with teachers who (i) have low expectations of their students' abilities and learning potential; (ii) cling tightly to the methodological principle that students should only be confronted with tasks (or exercises) *after* they have been instructed; or (iii) prefer to exert tight control over the process of task performance, both from a cognitive and from an organizational point of view (see also Chapter 10 in this volume).

b *Raising the complexity of the task by imposing additional performance demands*. For instance, the teachers in the above-mentioned Flemish studies showed a tendency to overemphasize linguistic correctness in functional speaking and writing tasks. During a classroom observation one of the authors conducted, children of the second year of primary education (8-year-olds) were asked to write a short story (in Dutch) about the lovely lion Loeki who was asked to mail a package that was too big for the mailbox. The observer was sitting next to a non-native speaking pupil who had started writing very enthusiastically. However, after a short while, he stopped writing because he could not figure out how to verbalize Loeki's solution in Dutch (i.e. Loeki actually tickled the mailbox so that it opened its mouth very widely).

> Exactly at the moment the pupil was looking for words, the teacher reached the pupil's desk, read what he had written down so far and pointed with his finger to a minor linguistic error the child had made in the first sentence. It took a long negotiation of form for the child to comprehend the teacher's feedback, but the strongest effect of this intervention was that the child's motivation to go on writing dropped sharply. Not only had the teacher pointed out a mistake (instead of praising his progress), but the support he had needed the most (i.e. how to say what he wanted to say) had been completely missing.

All this underlines that, for teachers, 'teaching the task-based way' not only has to do with becoming acquainted with certain theoretical principles and developing particular interactional skills, but also with developing a learner-centred attitude. From an affective point of view, the success of task-based lessons, at least partly, depends on:

a the teacher's (high) *expectations* of the students' ability to perform tasks and of the fact that they will learn language from performing the tasks;
b the teacher's *willingness* to share responsibility for task performance and control of the learning process with the students;
c the teacher's *empathy* for the particular affective and cognitive problems individual students face and for their specific language learning needs ;
d the teacher's *flexibility* in adapting his support and interventions to different students and allowing for different routes and rates of language acquisition in his classroom;
e the teacher's *tolerance* of interlanguage errors, disparate opinions, diversity in task performance conditions and use of languages other than the language of instruction if the students prefer to do so or find that helpful;
f the teacher's *enthusiasm* with his learners' performances, ideas and opinions, in task-based teaching in particular and in teaching in general.

If the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to implement task-based lessons in classroom practice are scrutinized and listed, 'teaching the task-based way' may seem very complex. On the other hand, every time we observe teachers who have adopted TBLT and who reach high levels of performance (and appreciation) with their students, we always have the feeling that 'task-based teaching' is actually a very simple and 'natural' thing to do, at least as long as teachers keep in mind guiding principles of task-based language

teaching, such as 'goal-directedness' and 'meaningful interaction', both implying a high degree of learner-centredness.

4 Conclusions

There can be no doubt that we need far more classroom-based research that empirically describes the way that teachers handle tasks in the classroom (Bygate, 2005). From the limited number of case studies that we were able to describe in this chapter, we can infer that teachers play a crucial role in exploiting the vast learning potential of the tasks in question. Taking continuous care to cater for their students' motivation to invest mental energy in task performance and interactionally supporting their students while doing so, teachers can create powerful language learning environments, especially if they take actions that are:

a consistent with the methodological principles underlying TBLT and believed to foster second language learning;
b consistent with the core goals of the curriculum i.e. the target tasks that learners are supposed to be able to perform;
c consistent with local contextual conditions.

Teaching the task-based way is not only rewarding for the students. Many of the teachers in the examples that we used in this chapter emphasized that through adopting (some of) the principles underlying a task-based classroom practice, teaching becomes 'more fun', 'more varied' and more rewarding (see also Chapter 10 in this volume). Teacher C, whom we videotaped for a 'good practices video', believes that task-based language teaching:

> is just more interesting. And they (the pupils) learn more. ... Eventually, you have to grow ... in everything you do. Just like we don't work with a 10-year-old computer anymore, because computers have changed completely ... You have to try it out. You have to give it a chance. And if you like the results, go for it!

Note

[1] This article is based to a large extent on Colpin & Van Gorp (1997), Van Avermaet (1995), Van den Branden & Kuiken (1997) and Van Gorp (2003). All of these articles were written by researchers and inservice trainers of the Centre for Language and Education, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Kuiken excepted), in order to communicate a theoretical and practical view on the role of the teacher in task-based language education to teachers, headteachers, teacher trainers, syllabus developers, educationalists and school counsellors in Flanders.