4 *Developing language tasks for primary and secondary education*

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This chapter focuses on the design of tasks, more specifically on the manipulation of task features believed to enhance language learning. We will demonstrate our case by referring to and drawing examples from task-based syllabuses that were developed for Dutch language education in primary and secondary education. The tasks in these syllabuses aim to support the students in acquiring the Dutch academic language proficiency needed to be successful at a Dutch-medium primary or secondary school. In describing the tasks, we will discuss the main task features enhancing language learning and also illustrate how classroom activities can be constructed around tasks. Reference will also be made to research studies that empirically substantiate the choices that we advocate.

1 Introduction

As pupils pursue their academic career, the linguistic demands of the school system that they are confronted with gradually increase. The language proficiency needed to understand the teachers' input in primary and secondary schools, aimed at transmitting subject content and enhancing the development of academic skills, knowledge and attitudes, strongly differs from the language pupils use in everyday situations outside school (e.g. Hodson, 1998; Mohan, 1986; Valdés, 2004) (for a more detailed discussion of the specific features of academic language at school, see also Chapter 5 in this volume). For instance, in classrooms, conversations are typically about abstract topics that are not present in the 'here-and-now'. Language input is often not embedded in, or does not refer to, concrete situations. Academic text tends to be decontextualized and cognitively demanding (Cummins, 2001). In many cases, students are exclusively dependent on language to interpret the message that is conveyed. To understand academic input, the students have to acquire extensive vocabulary and syntactic skills and sophisticated reading and listening comprehension skills. Producing the necessary academic language is also very demanding for the learner: messages have to be encoded

in academic terms, requiring the use of abstract or specialist terminology and syntactic structures that express complex relationships (Lemke, 1990).

Furthermore, to acquire new subject matter, pupils are not only expected to understand and (re)produce language, but also to process new information, adding this to their existing knowledge base, and making it available for future use or to use it as a scaffold for further cognitive development (Grabe & Stoller, 1997). This presupposes a complex range of mental operations in which language plays a determinant role – from solving problems and drawing tables, to writing summaries and producing convincing arguments (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994; Huang, 2004).

In many primary and secondary schools around the world, language courses are organized to develop students' academic language skills. To this end, the medium of instruction is also taught as a subject. For instance, in Flanders, task-based syllabuses for the teaching of Dutch as a second language were developed by professional syllabus developers at the Centre for Language and Education (University of Leuven) in order to support primary and secondary school pupils to develop academic language skills in the main medium of instruction (e.g. Bogaert & Goossens, 1992, 1994; Bogaert *et al.*, 2000; Jaspaert, 1996c). The development of these syllabuses was based upon the following principles:

1 Task-based syllabus development started from a detailed description of the official attainment targets, issued by the Ministry of Education, regarding Dutch academic language proficiency, with a view to determining curriculum goals. It also used an analysis of the linguistic features of the Dutch academic language used by teachers in Flemish classrooms and included in syllabuses across the curriculum. Together, these two sources led to a detailed set of goals, which were described in terms of the language tasks that pupils should be able to perform in order to function as successful learners in Flemish schools (for more details on target task description and needs analysis see also Chapter 2 in this volume). The syllabuses were task-based in the sense that 'tasks' were used as the basic unit for describing the goals of the syllabus.
2 In terms of pedagogical methodology i.e. *how* to stimulate pupils to develop the academic language proficiency needed to perform well at school, tasks had to be devised so as to maximally foster language acquisition. The syllabuses started from the premise that learners learn to perform communicative language tasks by trying to perform these very tasks, by engaging in meaningful language

use and receiving interactional support while doing so. In other words, 'tasks' were also the basic unit for the classroom activities the syllabuses were supposed to give rise to.

3 The syllabuses were intended for use in mainstream classes of official Flemish education in which both L1 speakers of Dutch and L2 speakers (i.e. children born in Flanders but speaking a mother tongue other than Dutch) were present. In line with international research into the effectiveness of education for minority groups (e.g. Thomas & Collier, 2000; Nicaise, 2001), official Flemish educational policy does not support the practice of special pull-out classes for non-native speakers of Dutch, but strongly encourages the integration of native and non-native speakers throughout mainstream official education. A one-year transition class is available, but only for newcomers who arrive at a later age in Flemish education (for more details see Chapter 3 in this volume). After the first year however, these newcomers are also integrated into the mainstream classes.

The combination of these three principles led to a set of key features characterizing what was considered to be a suitable task in the syllabuses. This set of features was used as a criterion checklist by the syllabus developers. In the paragraphs below, these key features will be described and illustrated.

2 Task features enhancing language learning

The first example in Figure 1 comes from a task-based syllabus for primary education (Jaspaert, 1996c). This is a writing task for children in the second year (aged 7–8). In the introduction to this task, the pupils have experienced that whenever they have a personal problem, they can write a letter to a children's magazine, so that other children can reply. This writing task is part of a larger theme, including 15 tasks all having to do with helping people.

The pupils are asked to read the 'letters containing a personal problem'. Their task is to try and come up with a solution to each of these problems. The pupils work together in groups of six. Following the group work, each member of the group is assigned one of the six letters and has to write down the reply individually. Altogether, for 7-year-olds this is a complex language task in which they have to speak and listen while discussing possible solutions, as well as read and write. The four language skills are addressed in an integrated way in this task, just as they often are in day-to-day communicative situations in which people have to use language.

Help!	
Angry I am a girl of eleven. When I can't work something out, I tend to get very angry. Then I start kicking things around. Who can help me stop doing this?	**Nailbiting** I always bite my nails. I bite them all day long. My nails are very short. I have already put some stuff on them. It tasted bad, but it didn't work. Who knows what I should do?
Sweets I eat a lot of sweets, even though my mum and dad tell me not to. My teeth are rotten. But I like it so much. Sometimes I search the whole house for sweets. This has to stop. Can anybody help me?	**Pet** I want to have a pet, like a cat or a dog. But I can't have one. Sob! Sob! What can I do to convince my parents?
Going to bed I always have to go to bed at 8 o'clock. All the other kids in my class stay up until 8.30 pm. I hate it. Who can help me?	**Dreams** I have the same dream every night. A creepy person follows me. I start running. And just when the creepy person has almost caught me, I wake up. When I wake up, I am very frightened. Who can help me?

Figure 1 Writing task (six children calling out for help). Taken from a task-based syllabus for Dutch language learning in the second grade of primary school. (From: *Toren van Babbel*, Wolters/Plantyn)

2.1 Language as a means . . .

In the 'Help-task', the pupils read the six letters not so much to analyse syntactically the language that their fictitious peers have used, nor with a view to discovering which words are new and thus have to be learnt. The pupils read these letters to find out what personal problems their peers are struggling with. They are primarily interested in message content. In other words, for the pupils, language is a means to reach the functional goal of the task. When they perform these kinds of tasks, they are not exclusively, or even consciously, dealing with language as form. They are primarily concerned with understanding and functioning in the aspects of life they are being presented with (in this case, the commonplace personal problems of 7-year-old children). In Wells' (1986: 215) terms, they are 'active meaning makers'. Clearly, while reading the letters with

that particular goal in mind, they process language from a formal point of view as well. For instance, they may have to think aloud about the meaning of a particular word in order to understand the message. And if they want to reply to the letters, they will need to consider formal aspects again. The pupils have to come up with a solution to the problems at hand and express these solutions, making use of adequate linguistic means. They will have to match function with form. Nevertheless, paying some, even if temporary, attention to form does serve the overriding goal of 'meaning making'.

This functional approach contrasts quite strongly with more traditional language exercises that explicitly focus children's attention on the linguistic code. Appel (1996: 35), evaluating the education of Dutch as a subject in the Netherlands in the early 1990s, observed that:

> the methodological format predominates in language exercises … Language methods are full of lessons in which words are turned about, composite nouns are combined incorrectly, or spaces are deleted in isolated sentences leading to a long and obscure string of letters. Quite often, syllabus designers try to present these exercises in an original or funny way, but this is pure show. (our translation)

In other words, formal language education tends to focus on linguistic knowledge as a goal in itself, leaving it up to the learner to create or search for opportunities for their functional use. This may be counterintuitive to the learner, and even counterproductive:

> the young child does not encounter language as an isolated phenomenon but, rather, within the rich context provided by the social interaction that takes place between child and adult. … The close relationship between the social context and the language the child hears, assists the child in 'cracking the code' of language.
>
> (Harris, 1993: 29, describing Jerome Bruner's view)

For most (young) language learners, using language and learning language are inextricably entwined with exploring the world, manipulating the world, getting personal jobs done and interconnecting with other people (Donaldson, 1978; Ritchie and Bathia, 1999; Tomasello, 2003; Verhelst, 2004). In fact, the individual's desire to reach these essentially non-linguistic goals and the extent to which they have been able, or unable, to reach these in the past, is what drives them, consciously or unconsciously, to make mental efforts with a view to acquiring language.

2.2 ... *to reach a motivating goal*

Willis (1996: 11) distinguishes three essential conditions for language learning:

a *exposure* to rich but comprehensible input of real spoken and written language in use;
b *use* of the language;
c *motivation* to listen and read the language and to speak and write it.

With regard to the third condition, Van Lier (1996: 98) claims that 'experts and amateurs alike, agree unanimously that motivation is a very important, if not *the* most important factor in language learning'.

Following Gardner's seminal work (Gardner & Lambert, 1959; Gardner, 1985), motivation is usually referred to as a general attitude towards learning the target language. However, next to this reasonably stable disposition ('trait motivation'), Tremblay *et al.* (1995) also distinguish 'state motivation', which refers to a far more transitory and temporary response to local language learning conditions. In a task-based context, the latter type of 'motivation' (MacIntyre *et al.*, 2001; Peirce, 1994; Ellis, 2003) refers to the learner's willingness to invest mental energy into performing particular language learning tasks, and thus into trying to comprehend the language input and/or produce the language related to performing a task. In this vein, Dörnyei (2001a,b, 2002) advocates a process-oriented approach that looks at the dynamic motivational processes that take place during task completion.

This type of motivation is a complex phenomenon. It is, among other variables, influenced by learner characteristics and beliefs (such as their expectations of success at task completion), the learning environment (support or hindrance), features of the task and the behaviour of the teachers and learners during the performance of a task. In TBLT motivation is highly dynamic in nature. It follows the wobbly track of task performance and, at the same time, influences it. From a process-oriented point of view, Dörnyei (2002) recognizes three distinct phases of the motivational process:

a In the *preactional* stage, motivation needs to be generated. In this stage, learners need to set clear goals for themselves and have to 'launch' into action.
b During the *actional* stage, the generated motivation needs to be actively maintained and protected. Based on an ongoing appraisal of the incoming stimuli from the environment and the progress

made towards task completion, the learner will need to regulate, enhance and protect further action.

c Finally, in the *postactional* stage, learners evaluate their past experiences in order to determine the kind of activities they will be motivated to carry out in the future.

From the above, it can be inferred that tasks will work best to the extent that they inspire the learner to work i.e. to invest mental energy in task performance and to persist, even if the task is complex or difficult. The learner has to keep task performance going. The motivation to perform a task should therefore preferably be learner-intrinsic, rather than the kind of 'surrogate motivation' created by gimmicks, grades and superficial devices that Van Lier (1996: 121) claims education is heavily polluted by. One of the syllabus designer's primary ambitions when developing tasks, then, should be to create tasks that pupils *want* to perform and bring to a good end, for this may be one of the best guarantees that, provided language use is necessary to perform the task, the pupils will try and cope with the linguistic demands posed by the task.

Evidently, the syllabus designer has to recognize that he cannot control the complete motivational process comprising the three stages mentioned above. Further, the extent to which motivation will be maintained will be strongly influenced by the learner's interaction with other task participants (Noels *et al*., 1999; Dörnyei, 2002; see also Chapters 8 and 9 of this volume on the teacher's role in maintaining the learner's motivation). Nonetheless, syllabus designers can make a strong contribution towards raising the motivational power of tasks.

The letters from the children's magazine in Figure 1 provide an example of a language task that has high potential for fascinating and intrinsically motivating the pupils, and thus launching them into action in the preactional stage. The letters are about real, recognizable problems such as having to go to bed early, having bad dreams or longing for a pet. The pupils may have these problems themselves or they might have friends who do. This may motivate them to discuss possible solutions to these problems in their groups and to try and come up with proper answers in their replies. This kind of interest may arouse more intensive mental energy than the extrinsic motivation arising from the teacher's rewards and sanctions. Implementation studies carried out by the syllabus developers, in which tasks like this one were tried out by teachers and learners and commented upon (e.g. Duran, 1994; Linsen, 1994; Timmermans, 2005), confirm the strong motivational power of such tasks.

As the feedback and teacher logs in these implementation studies testify, games, quizzes, detective stories, riddles and scientific tests often appeal to young learners at first glance. In terms of content, tasks should focus on a topic or idea that captivates the learners' interest (Boeckaerts & Boscolo, 2002). In one of the task-based syllabuses we developed for primary school, the pupils, upon turning the wheel of a time machine, found a mysterious message consisting of three words: 'great, green and extinct'. The teacher asked the children to come up with ideas for what the message could be about and to bring relevant information to the classroom. Most of the pupils guessed correctly and the next day brought to school a pile of books, toys and other things relating to dinosaurs.

Fascinating topics may be combined with goal-oriented processing demands in order to activate learners and give them interesting problems. For instance, 10-year-olds may be asked to read various pseudo-scientific texts in order to evaluate different hypotheses on how dinosaurs disappeared from the earth. Problem-solving tasks may also turn less interesting content into fascinating business. Reading academic texts about moles may be less interesting than reading texts on dinosaurs, but when a text about moles is accompanied by a task with an interesting goal, the learners' innate curiosity and, consequently, their motivation to read the text may be enhanced. Suppose, for instance, strange footprints have been found near a bed of lettuce. Someone has eaten the lettuce. Do the footprints belong to a mole? Does a mole eat lettuce? Such problem-solving tasks may increase learners' goal-orientedness (Dörnyei, 1994; Schmidt *et al.*, 1996; Schumann, 1998; Tremblay & Gardner, 1995) and promote learners' autonomy in finding solutions to the problem. They can enhance learners' self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Vallerand, 1997) and self-regulatory strategies (Dörnyei, 2001b) that, in turn, have a positive impact on the learner's motivation.

Another way of enhancing the motivational power of tasks is to embed them in a story line (Letschert, 1995). Story lines can be constructed around one particular task or around a number of tasks e.g. the time machine 'transporting' the children to various periods in history or the disappearance of a fictitious personage, challenging the pupils to collect clues by performing a variety of language tasks (was X perhaps eaten by a mole?). Task performance conditions, such as allowing pupils to cooperate while performing the task, can also add to the motivational power of tasks (Dörnyei, 1997; see also section 2.5 below).

2.3 Tasks involving relevant and natural language

Reading children's letters and trying to find out how dinosaurs became extinct may be great fun, but are such tasks really relevant to the pupils' language learning needs? In addition to raising their motivational power, syllabus developers also need to take care that the pedagogical tasks they develop have a clear link with the target tasks learners are supposed to be able to perform. The general principles for linking pedagogical tasks to target tasks are discussed at length in Chapter 2 of this volume. Below, we will briefly describe how we went about establishing this link for the primary school syllabus for Dutch as a second language from which Example 1 was taken.

2.3.1 Needs analysis of academic language

Two anchors were used in order to ensure the goal relevance of the tasks in the primary school syllabus. First of all, since the Flemish primary schools using the syllabus were Dutch-medium state schools, the tasks needed to work towards the official attainment targets for Dutch academic language learning issued by the Flemish Ministry of Education. These goals describe what pupils must be able to do with, and know about, the Dutch language by the end of primary school (Departement Onderwijs, 1998) and at the end of the different grades of secondary education (Departement Onderwijs, 2002). These official attainment targets also took 'task' as the basic unit of description. Four parameters for describing tasks were used: (a) which *skill* pupils must master; (b) at which *level of cognitive processing* (see Chapters 2 and 3 in this volume); (c) involving which *type of texts*; (d) for which *public/audience*?

Secondly, a corpus study of the actual linguistic demands posed by Flemish teachers in classroom interaction was conducted (Jaspaert, 1996a; Schrooten, 1997). To investigate what kind of language pupils have to understand and produce at school, a large sample of the oral language used by teachers in the classroom and a corpus of texts in handbooks which were used in Flemish classrooms at that time were analysed. The corpus involved both language used in language lessons and in other subjects (mathematics, history, geography, religion, etc.). The corpus was analysed at the levels of vocabulary, syntax, morphology and language functions. Vocabulary was analysed in terms of frequency and spread in order to find out which words were typical for each grade.

Together, the official attainment goals and the analysis of academic

language in Flemish schools provided workable parameters for establishing the relevance of the language tasks in the task-based syllabus. For instance, the task involving children's personal letters (Figure 1) can be considered highly relevant, because pupils have to read (*skill*) letters (*text type*) from unfamiliar peers (*public*) on a descriptive level (*level of processing*). This is a task they have to be able to perform according to the attainment goals. When the pupils reply, they have to write (*skill*) a letter (*text type*) to unfamiliar peers (*public*) on a restructuring level (*level of processing*).

For the syllabus designers, the official attainment targets constituted a checklist in devising appropriate tasks. The corpus-based study of academic language supplemented an instrument for a post-hoc analysis at the micro level of linguistic elements. For instance, it allowed for a comparison of the vocabulary in a task with the vocabulary that was typical of classroom instruction in the corresponding school year. In a similar vein, the parameters used for the description of the attainment targets combined with the linguistic parameters could also be used to assess and manipulate the relative complexity of the tasks throughout the curriculum of the different school years (for more details on sequencing tasks, see Chapter 3 in this volume).

This interpretation of what constitutes relevant language tasks contrasts with courses in which the relevance of language input and output is mainly determined by the chosen theme (e.g. 'autumn', 'clothing') or with structure-based methods, where language tasks are devised to elicit and highlight, often in quite unnatural ways, specific target language rules. In TBLT form follows function. Linguistic forms are dealt with not as a goal in their own right, but because they are naturally entwined with functional language use in certain tasks. The task-based syllabus designer's main concern is not whether the linguistic elements in the tasks are relevant. His first concern lies with the sampling and selection of relevant tasks. While performing these tasks, the learner will have to deal with relevant language. In other words, linguistic elements derive their relevance from belonging in a natural way to the performance of relevant tasks.

2.3.2 Pedagogical tasks as stepping stones

Combining the attainment goals with the detailed description of language use on the basis of a corpus study also allows for the deduction of pedagogical tasks from real target tasks. Long (Long & Crookes, 1993) views pedagogical tasks as a stepping stone towards the performance of target tasks:

> They [pedagogic tasks] will be increasingly accurate approximations (according to criteria such as communicative success, semantic accuracy, pragmatic appropriacy, and even grammatical correctness) to the target tasks . . . . Since target tasks will usually be more complex than their related pedagogic tasks, increasingly accurate approximation will normally imply students addressing increasingly complex pedagogical tasks. (1993: 40–1)

In the above-mentioned task-based syllabus, pedagogical tasks vary from target tasks, not only in level of complexity, but also in motivational power: very often, pedagogical tasks are the more motivating variants of the academic target tasks that learners may perceive as boring. For instance, in secondary education, teachers and syllabus designers often assume that promoting students' academic language learning proficiency is best done by tackling texts on history, geography and other subjects in the course of Dutch. In terms of relevance, this approach may be highly satisfying, however, these texts often lack motivational power and, in addition, they tend to be very complex: they abound in technical jargon, present the reader with unknown worlds, abstract terminology, high information density and metaphorical speech. This may have a negative impact on pupils' expectations of success and perceived coping potential (Dörnyei, 2002) and, as a result, may undermine their motivation to try and understand the text.

A viable alternative may be pedagogical tasks involving texts that deal with unusual, exciting or even spectacular topics, while at the same time elaborating the pupils' knowledge of the world in such a way that the knowledge domains included in the wider curriculum are covered. For instance, a text about plants that possess exceptional survival mechanisms or that have unusual growth patterns, texts about the intelligence of dolphins or about the fall of Pompeï may be more interesting to students, while at the same time still providing them with a solid basis for developing knowledge of the subject as well as academic reading skills. This would also give students a scaffold that would motivate them to deal with 'real' academic texts covering similar topics from a scientific and more abstract perspective.

To reach this goal, these texts, and the pedagogical tasks constructed around them, should have clear analogies with texts in the other subjects of the curriculum. In terms of task processing demands, what learners are asked to do with the texts in the Dutch course should closely match the kinds of things learners are supposed to do with target texts in the academic curriculum, such as:

1 Using them as a manual for performing physical or mental actions (e.g. instructions for experiments, instructions on how to make a certain product, procedures or algorithms for calculating or for decision-making, instructions for arithmetic tasks, etc.).
2 Consulting them as a source of information:
   - for finding the answer to a question or for solving a problem;
   - for processing and integrating knowledge;
   - for comparing the information in the text with already acquired knowledge, with particular opinions, set standards, etc.

From a formal point of view, the language in the pedagogical task should also closely resemble the language that is typical of subjects such as history and geography. Thus, the language should be decontextualized, include syntactically complex sentences expressing a variety of relationships and include 'academic' vocabulary, coherence markers, etc. (Schleppegrell, 2001; Young & Nguyen, 2002).

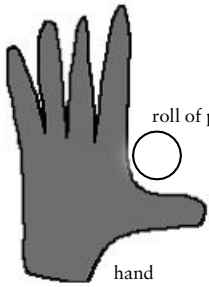
These features, however, should not all be present in the texts from the beginning. As mentioned above, pedagogical tasks are manipulations of target tasks, not only in terms of motivating power, but also in terms of complexity (see also Chapter 3 in this volume). For instance, the level of decontextualizing can be controlled by the syllabus designer: texts at the beginning of a task-based syllabus or at the beginning of a new theme will preferably deal with concrete topics or offer extensive visual support. The density and syntactic complexity of the text as well as demands at the level of vocabulary can also be lowered. The pupils can then gradually build up their knowledge of the world, develop reading comprehension strategies and the academic language proficiency needed to handle more complex texts.

To illustrate this, Figure 2 shows an example of a text from a task-based syllabus for the first year of secondary education, aimed at improving academic language proficiency (Bogaert & Goossens, 1992, translated from Dutch by the authors of this chapter). The text in the example has to be used as a manual for performing a physical action.

Since the goal of task performance is situated at an action level, the above-mentioned tasks will probably be very motivating for pupils with a relatively low level of academic language proficiency. The tasks also provide strong contextual support, supporting the pupils in comprehension of the language input.

Similar examples of pedagogic tasks abound in the task-based syllabus for primary education that we mentioned earlier. When the target task, for example, requires children to understand and act out

Can you see through your hand?



Maybe this experiment will help you . . .

Take a thin magazine and roll it up into a cylinder with a diameter of about 2.5 centimetres. Raise your left hand about 10 centimetres from your face. At the same time, hold the roll of paper in your right hand, and put it between your index finger and the thumb of your left hand, as shown in the picture.

Next, briefly look through the roll with your right eye and look at your left hand with your left eye. Close both your eyes and then open them again. What do you see when you look at your left hand?

Figure 2 A hole in your hand. A task taken from a task-based syllabus for Dutch language education at the level of secondary education. (From: *KLIMOP+TATAMI*, Centre for Language and Education, Leuven)

handbook instructions, the syllabus designer can 'disguise' the task and ask children to bake a cake. In order to do so, they need to follow the instructions of the recipe very carefully. Thus, without being consciously aware of the fact that they are performing an academic reading task, children can mix the ingredients and heat up the oven. The pupils get involved because, in the end, they really want to taste their own cake. One of the most typical reactions of teachers who started working with task-based syllabuses in Flanders was that their pupils were much more motivated to tackle these kinds of tasks than traditional language exercises (Devlieger *et al.*, 2003; Duran, 1994; Linsen, 1994; for more details on the implementation of task-based syllabuses, see Chapter 10 in this volume).

In another example taken from the same syllabus, the children have to read a description of a fictitious island in order to find out whether this would be an exciting place for children to go to. In terms of vocabulary and grammatical constructions, and even at the level of skill and processing demands (reading comprehension at the restructuring level), the text looks very much like an ordinary description in a geography book, but since it is embedded in an appealing story line and understanding the text is a means to answering an interesting question, children are eager to read the text in detail.

2.4 Tasks containing a gap

Although pedagogical tasks may be conceived of as the easier variants of target tasks, from a logical point of view, there should still be a gap between the students' current language proficiency and the language proficiency that is required for task performance. Tasks should address 'the zone of next potential' (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Williams & Burden, 1997) or the 'zone of proximal development' (Vygotsky, 1978).

If the task presents no difficulties, opportunities for learning may be minimal. For students, there may be some intrinsic reward in doing things they are good at and have done successfully several times already, yet learning new skills and expanding a linguistic repertoire requires that the language learner is asked to do things with language that they have not as yet fully mastered. Locke and Kristof (1996) report on meta-analyses of over 400 studies which show unambiguously that goals that are perceived as difficult and challenging but are still attainable lead to higher performance than goals that are easy. In a teacher-centred, structure-based and explicit 'presentation, practice and production' approach, learning is expected to take place at the moment the teacher explicitly instructs the learners on a new aspect of the target language or of language use. Exercises are intended to give the learner the opportunity to practise the newly acquired knowledge. At the same time, exercises allow the teacher to verify whether what was instructed was actually acquired. In this view, exercises should not contain items that were not learnt before. Teaching tends to be equated with learning, and the heterogeneity of pupils, and their varied learning experiences are not taken into account. Learners are supposed to learn the same things at the same time and in the very same way.

In task-based language education, by contrast, learners learn by confronting the gaps in their existing linguistic repertoire while performing tasks and being interactionally supported. How big the gap should be in task-based activities is difficult to determine, not least, because difficulty is to a great extent inherently learner related (Council of Europe, 2001; Robinson, 2001b; also see Chapter 3 in this volume). Yet, on the other hand, precision may not be as crucial an issue in task-based language education as is sometimes claimed in the literature (Ellis, 2003). In fact, for each individual pupil who is performing a task, the actual 'gap' will probably be different. This implies that each learner will run into different difficulties when dealing with the same task and, consequently, may learn different things. From the learner's point of view gaps are idiosyncratic: for

pupil A, a text aimed to encourage discussion on the extinction of dinosaurs will be difficult because she encounters various words she is unfamiliar with ('climate', 'cause'), while learner B will not be able to interpret the relation between digestion and starvation that is expressed only implicitly in the text. Still other pupils will have difficulties defending their own viewpoint or countering arguments against the theory they favour. The power of functional, meaningful tasks is that they offer the members of a heterogeneous group of learners (as is any class) a wide array of possibilities to each learn at their own level i.e. to learn whatever they are ready for at that particular moment.

This is illustrated by the fakir task (Figure 3) (Bogaert & Goossens, 1994), taken from a task-based syllabus for Dutch academic language learning in secondary education. In this task, the pupils first listen to a short story about a fakir who does spectacular things with ropes (part 1 in Figure 3). At the end of the story, the pupils are asked to determine whether the fakir is telling the truth or not. To find out the truth behind this story they can consult another text (part 2 in the figure) that describes in detail how the fakir goes about his clever trick.

Using language as a source of information, tasks like this one are of a more decontextualized nature than texts used as manuals (Figure 2). However, this does not necessarily imply that the former tasks only appear in later stages of the curriculum. As mentioned above, text and task complexity can be manipulated. To provide an answer to the question the text about the fakir raises, the pupils only need to comprehend the text on a global level, so they do not have to worry about or focus on the meaning of every single word or on words they have not acquired yet. It is crucial that teachers allow, and even stimulate pupils, to only aim at global reading comprehension in this case, for this comes naturally with the task (i.e. with the intended use of the text in view of the pursued goal). In turn, this will reduce the chance that pupils with a relatively low reading proficiency will perceive the task as extremely difficult, or even unfeasible and, hence, demotivating. On the other hand, pupils with a relatively higher level of language proficiency, can, in addition to global comprehension, be asked to answer questions that go into more details. In the latter case, the proportion of the information that the pupil has to process is considerably higher, so that he can ill afford not paying sufficient attention to certain details.

When tasks vary in the extent to which the information in texts has to be processed and pupils in some cases have to read on a global level while having to look for particular information in others, they

may also develop the strategic insight that the way you read a text depends on the intended use you want to make of it. This may help pupils to develop a wide array of goal-oriented reading strategies and provides an alternative, or a supplement, to the explicit instruction of strategies and direct modelling of complicated algorithms.

All this, once again, stresses the crucial importance of learners' motivation to try and tackle the tasks. In order for pupils to learn from bridging gaps in tasks, it is essential that they invest mental energy in doing something difficult. If they are not really motivated to bridge the gap and overcome the difficulties the task poses, they will not try to solve the comprehension and production problems they meet and hence, learn far less. On the other hand, pupils must also be able to bridge the gap. They can be very motivated to perform a challenging task, but if the gap is too large and they lack the tools to bridge it, learning effects may be minimal and self-confidence, as well as motivation, may decrease or collapse. Syllabus designers can take certain precautions to avoid gaps becoming too wide (see Chapter 3 in this volume), yet the bulk of the bridging work lies on the shoulders of the learner himself and his interlocutors. Through negotiating meaning, form and content, teachers and peers can provide a lot of crucial support when it comes to coping with task difficulties. We will elaborate on this point in the following paragraph (see also Chapters 8 and 9 in this volume on the role of the teacher in TBLT).

2.5 Tasks inherently elicit interaction and feedback

Syllabus designers should try to construct tasks in such a way that learners can, or even have to, engage in meaningful interaction with others in order to bring the task to a good end and, as a result, further develop their language proficiency.

2.5.1 Interaction serves different functions

While performing tasks, interaction with peers or with the teacher has the potential to fulfil many different functions for the individual language learner (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Ellis, 1999; Gass & Varonis, 1994; Lantolf, 2000; Long, 1983b, 1996; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Ortega, forthcoming; Pica, 1994; Swain, 1985, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978):

- The interlocutor can add to the learner's motivation to tackle the task and to persist when facing difficulties.

A Gruesome Performance

The teacher introduces and reads the following story:

Just before sunset, a fakir calls the passers-by to come and watch his performance. Seated in a circle with torches, the audience watches the fakir take a length of rope from a wicker basket and throw it into the air. He repeats this action a couple of times to demonstrate that it is an ordinary rope. But then, as he throws the rope into the air again, it suddenly coils up in the darkness, until the top is no longer visible and then miraculously stays there. The fakir's assistant, a slim young boy climbs the rope and is seen to vanish into thin air. He ignores his master's calls to come back down. Impatiently, the fakir draws a sharp knife, clenches it between his teeth, and clambers up after the boy – and also vanishes from sight. Then there is a series of blood-curdling yells, and various dismembered limbs of the young boy fall to the ground, followed by his head. The fakir then slides down the rope, which falls down behind him. He joins his other assistants, who are standing in tears around the remains of the young boy. They put the parts of the body into a basket. When the fakir claps his hands, the young boy emerges from the basket, smiling, miraculously reassembled and with no apparent damage.

Task: How does this work? How do you think this 'miracle' can be explained?

Here are a number of possible explanations. Which one do you think is the correct one?

- *The fakir has magic powers: he defies the laws of gravity and has the power to resuscitate the dead.*
- *The fakir is in fact an extraordinary hypnotist: through mass hypnosis he makes the audience believe that certain things happen which in reality do not happen at all.*
- *The fakir uses a trick.*

After ticking the answer of your choice, ask your neighbour whether s/he has chosen the same answer or another one.

Who is right and who is wrong? Find out by reading the text opposite.

Text

The trick – for a trick it is – is performed at twilight, before a background of nearby hills or trees. The fakir relies on a thin but strong black cord slung between two high points about fifteen meters above ground level. The rope, which has a small but heavy black ball at the end and which is strong enough to support the weight of the slim boy, is thrown up over the cord. The boy climbs up the rope. The public is blinded by the light of the torches and cannot see the boy high up on the rope in the dark sky. Once the boy reaches the top, he attaches the rope to the horizontal black cord, which can then take the weight of the magician.

And the boy's dismembered body parts? When the fakir climbs up, hidden under his wide robe there are shaven monkey limbs, dressed in clothes similar to the boy's, and with a bit of red sauce splattered around. The boy's head is a wooden model fitted with a turban. When the fakir reaches the top, the boy climbs into his robe and throws down the limbs. When the fakir descends and goes to the basket, the boy disappears into it. The limbs then go into the basket, the lid is put on, the fakir claps his hands, and – presto! – the boy pops out.

Figure 3 A gruesome performance. A task taken from a task-based syllabus for Dutch language teaching at the level of secondary school. (From: *KLIMOP+TATAMI*, Centre for Language and Education, Leuven)

- The interlocutor can function as a sounding board for the learner, stimulating the latter to verbalize explicitly his ideas, opinions and hypotheses, and in this way manipulate concepts, definitions, meanings and forms.
- The interlocutor can provide feedback to what the learner says, questioning and challenging the latter's contributions, and in this way push the learner's output, both at a linguistic level and a cognitive level. This may, in turn, push the student to process input more accurately or profoundly.
- The interlocutor may engage in a collaborative dialogue with the learner which, if seen as a joint effort to construct discourse, promotes acquisition in a number of ways e.g. through scaffolding.
- The interlocutor may provide answers to questions the learner cannot solve himself. For instance, the interlocutor may explain the meaning of a word, suggest a phrase the learner could not come up with himself, explain a certain grammatical rule, correct errors, etc.

In this interpretation of TBLT, interaction serves as a powerful means for the learner to come to grips with particular aspects of language use that the task entails (e.g. the meaning of a word, how to say a particular thing) and, at the same time, creates a context for authentic language use in its own right.

2.5.2 Stimulating peer interaction

Syllabus designers can opt for grouping formats (e.g. information gap tasks) that prompt learners to cooperate, by making them mutually dependent on each other's work, each other's opinions or uniquely held information to solve a joint problem. Many tasks in the above-mentioned Flemish syllabuses are jigsaw or information gap tasks (Pica *et al.*, 1993). Every member of the group receives a different text, which presents a different hypothesis or different bits of information on the central topic. Every member has the responsibility of reading his own text and imparting his information to the other members of the group. Only in this way can the group perform the task successfully. Learners facing comprehension problems may in this way be prompted to ask for clarification or confirmation. Pupils who do not succeed in imparting their information in a clear and coherent way may be challenged, pushed and aided by other members of the group.

In a quasi-experimental study on the role of interaction in

language learning, Van den Branden (1995, 1997, 2000a) asked 10-year-old children in Flemish schools to perform one reading comprehension task and one speaking task. The tasks complied with the task features listed above: the pupils were asked to perform a motivating task that was relevant in terms of the official attainment goals and the linguistic forms included, but it was manipulated in order to increase motivational power. In the reading comprehension task (Van den Branden, 2000a), the pupils were asked to read a Dutch detective story consisting of a number of chapters. After each chapter, a 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 and negotiating about the meaning of difficult words and phrases with a peer;
d reading of the baseline version and negotiation with the teacher.

We will only focus on the effects of the peer condition here (for the effects of the teacher condition, see Chapter 8 in this volume). Peer negotiation yielded significantly better individual comprehension scores than individual reading of the baseline version or the premodified version. Rather unexpectedly, pairs that were heterogeneous in terms of level of Dutch language proficiency (like for instance pairs of NS and NNS speakers of Dutch) yielded more intensive interaction and more gains in terms of comprehension than homogeneous pairs. To explain these results, Van den Branden (2000a: 436) suggests that pupils with a relatively low level of language proficiency may learn from their more proficient peers because of the explanations of difficult words in the input the latter provides. This mechanism may also partly explain the added value for the more proficient partner:

> the efforts highly proficient pupils have to make to explain input that is (way) above the proficiency level of their interlocutors brings them profit as well. Trying to explain a difficult word or sentence to another may be a way of narrowing down its meaning for oneself.

Van den Branden further suggests that, in the heterogeneous dyads, the member with the superior language skills felt extra motivation to comprehend the input because there was a less proficient partner who counted on him.

A similar mechanism was probably at work in the speaking task of

this study (Van den Branden, 1997). This part of the study involved an information gap task, obliging the pupils to exchange information in order to solve a murder case. A pre-test–post-test design was set up, aiming to study whether the interaction that the pairs jointly constructed had any effects on the pupils' subsequent individual performance of the same speaking task. This proved to be the case. The pupils were found to negotiate meaning and message content while exchanging information, and this, in turn, had significant positive effects on subsequent individual output. Again, heterogeneous groups proved to be particularly eager to engage in negotiation routines. The less proficient speakers were alerted by their more proficient peers to the parts of their descriptions that were incomprehensible or unclear, and were also offered solutions to these language problems. For the less proficient peer, this feedback turned out to be very salient input, some of which was incorporated in the language produced during a subsequent individual performance of the same task. In turn, the more proficient peers were pushed by their less proficient peer to fine tune their output to the latter's level of comprehension. In this respect, the fact that the pupils were so highly dependent on each other in order to obtain crucial information may have been a decisive factor in terms of eliciting negotiation.

2.5.3 Promoting task-based interaction

Interaction among peers, however, does not always run smoothly (Cohen, 1986; Cohen & Lotan, 1997; Foster, 1998; Foster & Ohta, 2005). Problems that often arise in group interaction have to do with domination (one pupil dominates the task performance, reducing the other members' chances of contributing), non-involvement and, consequently, non-participation, the 'free rider effect' (one pupil does all the hard work while the others profit), the diffusion of responsibility (some pupils are simply ignored, their ideas are not taken into consideration, while pupils with a higher status do not bother to explain what is happening) and the absence of interactional processes, such as the negotiation for meaning, that are believed to foster language acquisition. Van den Branden & Van Gorp (2000: 48) studied the interaction in peer groups of 11-year-old children, as they were tackling tasks taken from Flemish task-based syllabuses for science education, based on Cohen's Cooperative Learning method of Complex Instruction (Cohen & Lotan, 1997; Paelman, 2001). The researchers concluded that the quantity and quality of interaction that the group work generated was heavily dependent on the type of task that the pupils were confronted with:

> Closed tasks that confronted the pupils with predigested input and asked for low-level processing (such as placing ready-made statements about the environment into certain categories) barely gave rise to serious discussion, nor to a confrontation between the pupils' own ideas and those in the input. At the other end of the continuum, tasks for which the goal was only vaguely described and which allowed for an almost excessive openness (such as writing the lyrics for a rap song), allowed the pupils to stray from the central topic and to 'take it easy' on the content level.
>
> A workable, and fruitful compromise between these two extremes seemed to be a task with a clearly defined goal (i.e. a well-defined problem), but which allowed the pupils a great deal of intellectual and creative freedom to design their own route towards the solution of the problem.
>
> (Van den Branden & Van Gorp, 2000: 48)

However, besides task features, there were other variables influencing the quantity and quality of peer interaction in this study. For instance, qualitative analyses revealed that the social relations between the group members had a strong effect on the interaction in the groups. The roles that the children took up, their relative status in the group, their personalities, the extent to which they were willing to cooperate and support each other and their interpretation of the task were so influential that the same task performed in two different groups resulted in two vastly different stretches of interaction, both from a quantitative and a qualitative point of view. Tasks are no easy recipes: the actual activity that they give rise to, and the learning that might arise as a result, remain highly unpredictable. In the end, it is the actual interactional work that matters and that results in learning.

In this respect, Van den Branden & Van Gorp (2000) suggest that when tasks do not result in the kind of rich interaction that they are supposed to elicit, the teacher might try to intervene and set things right, either by bringing the group members back to the task, by supporting them as they try to handle the tasks or by joining them in looking for answers to questions that are hard to find. In order to realize the full potential of task-based activities, the teacher must take over from the syllabus, which, because it is typically designed for a heterogeneous group of learners, can never be fine-tuned to the needs of all individual language learners (for more details on the role of the teacher in TBLT, see Chapters 8 and 9 in this volume).

3 Tasks integrated in language lessons

Having covered the main aspects of how tasks can enhance (academic) language learning, we will now discuss how educational activities were built up around tasks in the syllabuses we developed in order to function as optimal 'activity settings' (Rueda & Dembo, 1995). Though many different scenarios are possible, the syllabuses described in the previous paragraph stuck to a fairly tight lesson design. In the majority of cases, a task and a lesson (of about 50 minutes) coincided. We are aware of the fact that thinking of tasks as lessons in this way is simplistic. Some tasks undoubtedly need extended stretches of activity that go beyond the boundaries of a strict time schedule. Some tasks ask for outdoor activity and for the integration of different subjects in the curriculum (for more details on how tasks work across the curriculum, see Chapter 5 in this volume). One of the main reasons why the task designers stuck to a rather conservative conceptualization of tasks and lessons was the pressure exerted by the teachers involved in the above-mentioned implementation studies and try-out sessions. Treating tasks as lessons, then, was one of the compromises that the task designers made in order to promote the actual use of the syllabuses in the classroom (for more details on the reactions of teachers to task-based syllabuses, see Chapter 10 in this volume).

The lessons consist of three phases: an introduction (pre-task phase), a during-task phase of task performance and a post-task phase (cf. Skehan, 1996, 1998; Willis, 1996). By including a detailed description of the introduction, the during-task phase and the post-task phase in the syllabus guidelines, the syllabus designers aimed to offer maximum support to the teacher in using the tasks as a tool for creating powerful environments for language learning.

To illustrate the three phases of a task-based lesson, we will use another example of a task ('All for a coin'), which we have often used during in-service training for teachers of secondary education.

3.1 Introducing the task

The way in which a new task is introduced is quite essential in TBLT. Introductions to tasks usually integrate three functions:

a motivating the learners to perform the task;
b preparing the learners to perform the task by discussing presupposed or useful knowledge of the world;

All for a coin

Task: *The story below is about a boy who is in big trouble because his father thinks he is dumb and lazy. A smart girl comes to his aid. What do you think of the solution she proposes?*

Once upon a time there lived a rich merchant in Kashmir. This merchant had a son who was terribly stupid and lazy. Whatever instruction he was given by his father or mother, the son always did the exact opposite. If he did anything at all . . .

Eventually, the merchant got so upset that he wanted to chase his son out of the house. The boy's mother could not convince her husband into giving the son a last chance. The merchant called the boy and said: 'My son, I want you to go to the market and buy something that we can eat, something we can feed to the cow, and something we can plant in the garden. You are not allowed to spend more than this single coin. If you can manage to do this, then you can return home. If not, then stay away.'

While the boy was walking to the market square, he started crying. He had no idea how he could buy all these things with the single coin his father had given him. He would never be allowed to come home again. He was crying so hard that a girl, who was working in the fields, heard him and asked him what was the matter. When he told her about his father's assignment, she shook her head and told him not to worry. She told him that there was an easy way to perform this task.

That night the boy came home with a big smile on his face. He said: 'Father, I have brought something that meets all your demands,' and he put his treasure on the table. It was a watermelon.

Question: *Do you think the merchant will be satisfied with the watermelon or should the boy leave the house? Does your partner have the same opinion?*

Figure 4 All for a coin. A task taken from a task-based syllabus for Dutch language teaching at the level of secondary education. (From: *KLIMOP+TATAMI*, Centre for Language and Education, Leuven)

c organizing the performance phase by providing clear instructions on what the purpose of the task is, and how it should or can be performed.

Figure 5 illustrates how all this is stimulated in the introduction to the above-mentioned task.

To persuade pupils to 'cross the Rubicon' (Heckhausen, 1991) and step into the world of the task in order to learn from it, the pupils'

Pre-task conversation

'Once there was a boy who was in deep trouble: his father found him too lazy and stupid to be his son. Fortunately, a smart girl helped the boy, so he could escape his father's punishment. If you want to know what punishment the father had in mind for the boy, and what happened afterwards, you have to read the story for yourself. But mind: when you have finished reading, you have to tell me whether you approve of the girl's solution or not. I am very curious about your answers . . .'

Refer to the picture representing the region in which the story is situated and tell the pupils that the region is called Kashmir. Ask the pupils if anyone knows in which part of the world Kashmir is and if necessary, ask the pupils to look it up in their atlas (using the index).

Give the students instructions to read the story individually.

Then ask them:

- 'What did the boy eventually buy with his coin?' . . . 'Yes, indeed, he bought a watermelon.' Check whether all pupils know what a watermelon is.
- What do you think: will the merchant send his son away, or will he be satisfied with the watermelon? Why do you think so? First consider your answer well, and then write it down on a piece of paper. When you and your neighbour have finished, you can compare your answers.'

Figure 5 Introduction (pre-task phase) of the task 'All for a coin' (in Figure 4) (taken from the teacher manual of *KLIMOP+TATAMI*, Centre for Language and Education, Leuven)

interest has to be aroused. In this task, this happens by giving away a small part of the story that may catch their attention (see Figure 5). The story is about a stupid boy and a smart girl, while in folk stories it is usually the other way around. Teachers may include other details to hold attention and can add to the pupils' motivation by being enthusiastic about the story themselves. Since this is a reasonably simple story, not much knowledge of the world has to be established or elicited during the introduction. However, for tasks that deal with more culturally biased topics or topics with which many pupils are unfamiliar, an introductory conversation is preferably held during which the learners can activate or create relevant knowledge of the world that may be useful or, in some cases, indispensable for task performance.

There is always a danger of overload in this phase of the lesson. After all, the introduction should not take more time than the task

performance itself. Discussion of relevant knowledge of the world should ideally be limited to elements that can be of real service to the learner. The preparatory discussion should not take the place of the pupils' own meaning construction that builds on the use they make of the information in the text, the visual aids provided and their existing knowledge of the world. Neither should the teacher, at this stage, feel obliged to explain all difficult words in the text. For many words that may be difficult and that influence the degree to which the reader is able to access the story, the linguistic context may provide ample clues for the pupil to infer their meaning, or at least construct hypotheses about their meaning, themselves. And, of course, there is nothing that keeps the teacher from taking appropriate supportive actions *while* the pupils are dealing with the task (during-task phase) or afterwards (post-task phase). Problems may be tackled best when they actually occur i.e. when pupils get stuck while trying to perform the task. At that moment, the pupils may experience the information or explanation given or found as most relevant. The teacher should also refrain from giving away too much of the story beforehand or revealing how it ends. This might dampen the pupils' curiosity.

Towards the end of the introduction in the example above, the pupils are instructed to start reading the story individually. When they have finished reading, the teacher once again checks whether everybody has understood the instructions and knows what is expected of him or her. At this point, each pupil should know what the word 'watermelon' means: the teacher may want to control this explicitly, for the task cannot be performed if the pupils do not know this. Finally, the teacher restates the purpose of the activity in very explicit and unambiguous terms, indicating the conditions of performance and making instructions very specific (Locke & Kristof, 1996).

3.2 Supporting task performance

In the example above, having the pupils compare their solutions was included deliberately by the syllabus designers: this phase is specifically designed to generate authentic interaction, discussion and negotiation between language learners. The cognitive and interactional activity that the students develop at this stage is crucial in terms of intended learning outcomes. After all, task-based language learning is highly dependent on the basic premises of social-constructivism, stating that learners acquire complex skills by actively tackling holistic tasks, calling for an integrated use of the target skills, and by collaborating with peers and more knowledgeable

partners while doing so (De Corte, 1998; Rueda & Dembo, 1995; Steffe & Gale, 1995).

The most typical 'more knowledgeable partner' in the average classroom is the teacher. In line with the basic philosophy underlying TBLT, the teacher's interventions during the task-performance phase, however, should not result in a limitation or obstruction of learner activity and initiative. As will be elaborately described in Chapters 8 and 9 of this book, the teacher's role is not, in the first place, to solve the pupils' problems, but rather should take the form of interactional support in which the teacher mediates between task demands and the learner's current abilities. The role of the teacher, above all, consists in guiding the learner's problem-solving process. This process, and hence the teacher's supportive interventions, will be different for different learners. The essence of the mediation is that learners are supported to tackle the specific problems they face, whether these are related to cognitive operations or affective issues, whether they be problems having to do with the meaning or with the forms of language.

3.2.1 Combining focus on meaning with focus on form

There is considerable debate on whether focus on form should be provided to learners engaged in the authentic communication that tasks are supposed to generate, and to what extent this might interfere with the task's intended focus on meaning. Or, put in terms of the three phases of a task-based lesson, 'should focus on form be provided in the pre-task, the during-task or the post-task phase?' Recent research (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Ellis, 2003; Long *et al.*, 1998; Mackey & Philp, 1998; Norris & Ortega, 2000; Samuda, 2001; Skehan, 2002; Van Patten, 1996) offers no conclusive results and seems to support different options. It does seem to indicate, however, that the exact moment when focus on form is provided (i.e. before, during or after meaningful task performance) is not as decisive as its close proximity to the functional use of the targeted forms.

Goossens' recent study (2003) on the impact of explicit and implicit teaching on young children's second language acquisition corroborates the above hypothesis. In this study, six classes of 11–12-year-old children, spread over six different Flemish Educational Priority Policy Schools, were taught the basics of a semi-artificial language through the use of explicit, implicit and combined (explicit-implicit) language teaching methods. The results of this study highlight the potential of pedagogical approaches that combine

meaningful language use with a contextualized and task-embedded focus on form. The teaching condition in which new language items received explicit focus within a communicative context yielded the best acquisition scores. The fact that in this condition the new language had to be used by the children as a functional means to learn all kinds of exciting things about a strange island added to the enthusiasm with which they confronted the meaningful tasks they were asked to perform. Yet, the focus on form ensured that their attention was also drawn to the explicit meaning of specific lexical items and to a number of syntactic features of the semi-artificial language. In the meaning-only condition with only implicit introduction of new language items within a communicative context, the children got completely absorbed in the discovery of the strange island. Confronted with elaborate language input within a content-based context, they addressed the new linguistic code in an economical way, only processing and discussing the language they absolutely needed to perform the discovery tasks.

Goossens' study did not yield any firm conclusions on *when* focus on form should ideally be inserted. Whether this occurred before, after or during the task phase did not yield significant differences. Far more essential seems to have been the close proximity of focus on form to meaningful language use. This, then, leaves many options open for task-based syllabus developers and teachers constructing language lessons around tasks. Clearly, focus on form may be elegantly integrated in the during-task phase, for instance when students face comprehension or language production problems. If, for instance, students have to process the information in a particular text, but fail to do so because they do not know the meaning of certain essential words, explicit focus on the meaning of these words may be of immediate use. Likewise, short focus on form during the pre-task phase may contribute to the learner's noticing the linguistic forms while performing the task, while post-task focus on form may add to restructuring, automatizing and consciously attending to language forms that were used in the previous phase.

3.3 The post-task phase

Tasks may ask for a specific outcome, yet teachers (and learners) working with task-based syllabuses should be aware of the fact that the absolute correctness and uniformity of the product is less important in many task-based activities than the mental and interactional energy invested in the process of task performance. Tasks differ from exercises in the sense that learners do not have to prove

that they perfectly know how to apply a specific procedure or can (re)produce particular facts of knowledge. Tasks are designed, first and foremost, to create an environment in which learners are allowed to experiment with language, use language functionally and to make mistakes while doing so. Finding the correct solution may be a bonus, but learners do not necessarily have to find it in order to learn language. Through constructing joint dialogues, through negotiating meaning, through discussing different options, they may pick up new linguistic forms from each other, experiment with or come up with new procedures or strategies to solve a linguistic problem or extend their knowledge of the world.

This fundamental principle guides the design of the post-task phase. In the syllabuses we developed, the post-task discussion aims at a verbal and interactive reconstruction of the process of task performance. This is illustrated in Figure 6, which describes the post-task phase in the lesson described in Figures 4 and 5.

Post-task discussion

If the pupils do not succeed in answering the question, then discuss the features of watermelons, using the following questions:

- 'What is the first thing that springs to mind when I ask you what people do with a watermelon?'
- 'Does a watermelon only still your hunger?'
- 'Can you eat the whole watermelon? Which parts can't you eat? What do people do with the peels of vegetables and fruit? What can you do with the pits?'

Figure 6 Post-task discussion of the task in Figure 4 (taken from the teacher manual of *KLIMOP+TATAMI*, Centre for Language and Education, Leuven)

Teachers and students verbally reflect on the way in which the various groups or individuals tackled the task, including the routes that did not lead to a 'correct' solution (if the task was supposed to have one). In this way, the post-task discussion may have much to offer in terms of strategic communicative competence and general learning strategies, for it may offer the students valuable insights into how tasks can be tackled, what may be the possible effects of certain procedures or strategies, and what may be learnt in terms of efficiently and effectively performing similar tasks in the future.

Post-task phases also offer many opportunities for focus on form. Though teachers should not aim to convert the post-task phase to full-blown vocabulary drills, nor to a detailed text analysis, post-task

discussions lend themselves very nicely to the explicit discussion of linguistic forms. The syllabuses we developed advise the teachers to focus primarily on those linguistic elements or rules that are, or were, relevant to the students, whether they are words the pupils found hard to understand or errors they made in the during-task phase or expressions they failed to produce. Focus on form should, in other words, be attuned to the learners' internal syllabus (Littlewood, 1984; Long & Norris, 2000), rather than to the teachers' external syllabus.

4 Conclusions

Task-based syllabuses take the learning needs of the target group as the starting point. In order to promote learners' proficiency to perform the kind of language tasks they will face in life in general and in school, tasks are designed as pedagogical variants of the target tasks: they invite the learner to do the very same things with language and to get immersed in the same interactional and cognitive processes as when performing the target tasks. Pedagogical tasks will often be more motivating and simpler than the ultimate target task, yet they always require meaningful language use and require language learners to 'stretch their muscles'.

In order for learners to bridge the gap and learn from the tasks, meaningful interaction between learners, and between the teacher and the learners, is an essential ingredient of task-based activities. This is where the interlocutors largely take over from the syllabus. Nevertheless, this chapter has shown that syllabus developers can manipulate task design in such a way as to enhance the chance that interaction will occur and that interaction will be focused on certain aspects of content or particular linguistic items. By making certain items task-essential (Loschky & Bley-Vroman, 1993), chances are that the learners will pay attention to them. Furthermore, syllabus developers may provide ample suggestions to teachers as to how the interaction with the learners can be conducted. In many of the syllabuses we developed, we included suggested versions of introductory talks and post-task discussions. These were not intended to be prescriptive, but merely illustrative of the kind of rich interaction that the tasks in the syllabus will hopefully give rise to.