

1 TASKS IN SLA AND LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter Ellis points out how important it is for SLA researchers and language teachers to elicit samples of language use from learners. By “samples of language use” is meant samples of learners’ performance when their attention is not on accuracy. Researchers need these samples to investigate how L2 learning takes place. Teachers need them as evidence that successful learning is taking place.

SLA researchers recognize that such samples allow them to keep track of learners’ interlanguages development. Teachers affirm that these samples of language use are crucial to help learners succeed in developing their L2 proficiency.

How can these meaning-focused samples be elicited? The means that teachers and researchers have employed are “tasks”.

Tasks, therefore, play a very important role in SLA research and language pedagogy. In this summary we will focus on the examination Ellis makes of a number of “task” definitions and on the distinction he makes between “unfocused” and “focused” tasks. Other relevant issues contained in this chapter are not included in this summary.

DEFINING A “TASK”

“What exactly is a “task”? How does a “task” differ from other devices used to elicit learner language, for example an “activity” or an “exercise”, or a “drill”. . . Neither in research nor in language pedagogy is there complete agreement as to what constitutes a task, making definition problematic (Crookes, 1986), nor is there consistency in the terms employed to describe the different devices for eliciting learner language” (p. 2). Ellis examines the task definitions provided in activity 3.3 in this online course. He analyzes them from different dimensions in order to define what he will refer to by the term “task” in his book. The dimensions he uses to analyze task definitions are: 1) the scope of the task, 2) the perspective from which it is viewed, 3) the authenticity of a task, 4) the linguistic skills required to perform a task, 5) the psychological processes involved in task performance,

and 6) the outcome of a task. Make sure you look at the referred definitions as you read the analysis which follows.

1) Scope

Long's broad definition includes tasks that require use of language (making an airline reservation) and tasks where language is not required (painting a fence). Other definitions, such as those of Richards, Platt, Webber and Nunan define task as an activity that requires language.

Considering the goal of tasks in research and teaching (eliciting samples of language use), Ellis' definition of task refers to those whose successful completion requires language use.

The scope level deals with another important aspect of tasks, whether this concept should be exclusively used to refer to message-conveyance activities or should it be extended to include activities aimed at getting learners display their knowledge of correct language usage. Long, Richards, Platt and Webber, Nunan, and Skehan restrict the use of the term to activities where meaning is primary. Breen's definition incorporates any kind of activity, including "exercises". Considering the importance of meaning-focused communication in research and pedagogy, tasks for Ellis refer to activities that call for meaning-focused language use.

2) Perspective

It refers to whose perspective the task is being viewed from: the task designer's or the participants'. This is related to the distinction between meaning-focused and form-focused. Although a task may have been designed to promote focus-on-meaning, a particular group of learners may use it for a focus-on-form. Learners are free to redefine activities to meet their own learning goals. According to Ellis this leads us to an important dilemma *"Do we decide whether an activity is a "task" by examining the intention of the task designer, i.e., the task-as-workplan, or the learners' actual performance of the task, i.e., the task-as-process?"* (p. 5). Most of the definitions (Richards, Platt and Webber; Prabhu; Breen; Nunan; Lee) adopt the task-designer's perspective and so does Ellis. However, he adds (making reference to Breen's term of task) a task must be seen as a "workplan" that is aimed at engaging learners in meaning-focused language use. This

means a task may be successful and actually end in meaning-focused-communication; or it may fail and end in the learners' display of their knowledge of language.

The instructions or the "rubric" Ellis signals, are an essential part of the task workplan. They indicate the purpose (outcome) of the task and what the participants need to do to reach it.

3) Authenticity

It refers to the correspondence between the task and real-world activities (*situational authenticity*). For Long, a task must be real-world, every day activities: painting a fence, dressing a child, etc. Nevertheless, many tasks that are not necessarily real-world and that learners may never carry out in their lives have been used by teachers and researchers: telling a story using series of pictures, describing a picture for someone else to draw, finding the difference in two pictures, locating buildings in a map, etc. Such tasks according to Ellis do have some sort of relationship to the real-world "*because the kind of language behavior they elicit corresponds to the kind of communicative behavior that arises from performing real-world tasks. For example, in a picture drawing task, the participants will need to negotiate their way to a shared understanding by asking questions and clarifying meanings*" (P.6) (aspects of interactional authenticity). Based on this, Ellis' definition of task includes tasks that are situationally authentic and those which seek to achieve interactional authenticity.

4) Language Skill

It refers to the linguistic skills involved in performing tasks. Long's examples include oral (making an airline reservation) and written activities (writing a cheque). Bygate et al's definition does the same. Richards, Platt, and Webber state that a task "may or may not involve the production of language" (drawing a map while listening to a tape). Literature on tasks assumes that tasks are addressed at oral skills, especially speaking. Therefore, even if reading and writing might be involved at different stages of the task, the task itself is expected to be performed orally. In Ellis' view the emphasis most writers give to oral tasks simply reflects work on task-based research and pedagogy. In his definition, task refers to activities involving any of the four language skills.

5) Cognition Processes

In their task definition Richards, Platt, and Webber talk about “processing and understanding language”; Nunan states that tasks should involve learners in “comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language”; Prabhu refers to “some process of thought....[involving learners] in reasoning, making connections between pieces of information, deducing new information, and evaluating information”. Tasks therefore, clearly involve not only linguistic but also cognitive processes such as: selecting, reasoning, classifying, sequencing and transforming information. Even information and opinion-sharing tasks that do not involve reasoning involve other kinds of cognitive skills: perceptual skills.

However, according to Ellis, SLA research and language pedagogy have failed to give sufficient attention to the cognitive dimension of tasks. Ellis says “*It seems reasonable to suppose that there will be a relationship between the level of cognitive processing required and the kind of structuring and restructuring of language that tasks are designed to bring about*”. (P.7). By making reference to other authors such as Craik, Tulving and Robinson, Ellis concludes the cognitive dimension of tasks should be acknowledged and further described in all tasks definitions.

6) Outcomes

Most definitions of tasks agree on the fact that they should have a clear outcome, other than simple use of language. This means that a narrative task using pictures should be judged on whether the story was told successfully or not. A spot-the-difference task based on pictures should be judged on whether or not all the differences were identified.

However, Ellis makes a distinction between “outcome” and “aim” of a task. **Outcome** is what the learners arrive at once they have completed the task: a story, a list of differences, etc. **Aim** is the pedagogic purpose of the task: elicit meaning-focused language use, receptive and/or productive. This distinction makes clear how “*it is possible to achieve a successful outcome without achieving the aim of the task*” (P.8). Actually, working with tasks demands juggling teaching abilities. On one hand, we need to convince learners that what matters is the outcome. Otherwise, they will undermine the aim of the task and will display grammar knowledge rather than language use. On the other hand, the real objective of the task is that learners use language in ways that promote language learning.

Whether learners arrive at a successful outcome or not, is not of pedagogic importance. What really matters for language learning are the cognitive and linguistic processes learners go through when reaching the outcome.

Given the difference between outcome and aim, Ellis invites us to reconsider Skehan's claim that tasks should be assessed in terms of the outcome. The assessment of task performance in Ellis' view should ultimately lie *"in whether learners manifest the kind of language use believed to promote language learning"*. (p. 8)

Based on his analysis, Ellis concludes that the discussions around the definitions of tasks reflect a general, decontextualized view of what a task is. Bygate, Skehan and Swain suggest that *"definitions of task will need to differ according to the purposes for which tasks are used. Different definitions are needed for pedagogy and research and . . . definitions will need to vary depending on what aspect of pedagogy or research are at stake"* (p. 9). The same authors propose what they call a "basic, all-purpose definition" which is the same that appears in the *"Definitions of a task"* document (Cf. Activity 3.3). They suggest this definition can be modified to reflect the different purposes of tasks.

For Ellis what constitutes a task is to some extent variable but he thinks there is also a need for a generalized definition. Therefore, he presents the following criterial features to identify tasks:

CRITERIAL FEATURES OF A TASK

1. A task is a workplan

A task is a plan for learner activity. The real activity may or may not result in the original plan. Therefore, there exists the possibility of a task not resulting in communicative behavior.

2. A task involves a primary focus on meaning

A task aims at developing L2 proficiency through communicating. So, it requires focus on meaning. For this purpose, tasks will incorporate an information, opinion or reasoning gap. Participants are free to choose the linguistic and non-linguistic means to close the gap and achieve the outcome. However, a task can create certain semantic space and the need for

specific processes linked to linguistic options. Therefore, a task may indicate the content but the language used is the learner's choice.

3. *A task involves real-world processes of language use*

The workplan may engage learners in real-world language activities such as completing a form. It may also engage them in an artificial language activity such as finding the differences in two pictures. However, what is important is that the processes of language use resulting from the task performance (asking and answering questions, dealing with misunderstandings, etc.) reflect those that take place in real-world communication.

4. *A task can involve any of the four language skills*

For Ellis, the workplan may involve learners in listening to or reading a text; in displaying their understanding; in producing an oral or written text; in employing a combination of receptive and productive skills; or in demanding dialogic or monologic language use. In this sense Ellis points out that tasks are not different from exercises.

5. *A task engages cognitive processes*

The workplan calls upon cognitive processes to carry out the task: selecting, classifying, ordering, reasoning and evaluating information. Such processes influence but do not determine the language choice. That choice is left to the learner.

6. *A task has a clearly defined communicative outcome*

The workplan specifies the non-linguistic outcome of the task. It serves to determine when learners have completed the task.

Some of the above criteria are more important for judging whether or not an activity is a task. Criterion 2 (the need for a primary focus on meaning) for example, is a key criterion. Criteria 3, 4 and 7¹ are also very important, whereas 1, 5 and 6 seem to apply to most teaching materials, including exercises. Based on these criteria Ellis' definition of task is as follows:

¹ The author of this summary is aware there are only six criteria. However, as criterion number seven is mentioned in the original text it was left as it is to avoid misunderstandings on what Ellis might have referred to.

“A task is a workplan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed. To this end, it requires them to give primary attention to meaning and to make use of their own linguistic resources, although the design of the task may predispose them to choose particular forms. A task is intended to result in language use that bears a resemblance, direct or indirect, to the way language is used in the real world. Like other language activities, a task can engage productive or receptive, and oral or written skills, and also various cognitive processes”. (p. 16)

UNFOCUSED AND FOCUSED TASKS

Ellis considers it important to make a difference between unfocused and focused tasks.

Unfocused tasks are the kind of tasks that allow learners to choose from a range of forms but they are not planned with the use of a specific form in mind. **Focused tasks**, on the contrary, induce learners to process a specific grammatical structure. This processing should of course result from performing activities that fulfill the criteria of tasks, i.e., that language is used pragmatically to achieve some non-linguistic outcome. This means the specific grammar structure cannot be specified in the rubric of the task.

Focused tasks aim: 1) at stimulating communicative language use (as with unfocused tasks) and 2) at targeting the use of a particular, predetermined language structure. These kind of tasks are of great importance for researchers and teachers. Researchers need to know *“whether learners are able to perform some specific feature they are investigating in a communicative context. Teachers may want to provide learners with the opportunity to practice a specific feature under real operating conditions”* (P.17).

According to Ellis there are two ways in which a task can achieve a focus.

1. One is to plan the task in such a way that learners have to use the particular language structure to carry out the task. Loschky and Bley-Vroman define this kind of focused task as **“grammatical task”**. Designing this kind of tasks is very difficult since learners are always free to use communication strategies, if they want to avoid the target structure.
2. A focused task can also be designed by making language itself the content of the task. For example, after some examples on a given structure students may try to work out the rule to describe how this structure is used. Ellis calls this kind of activity a

“consciousness raising task” and he considers it a task rather than an exercise because it involves learners in cognitive processes such as analyzing and inferring. Furthermore, the language used among students to negotiate their inferences will be the same language used to talk about any other topic, therefore, it will be a meaning-centered talk.