

Defining "Tasks" and "Exercises"

Taken from Ellis, R. (2003: 3-5). *Task-based Language Learning and Teaching*. OUP

"Tasks" are activities that call for primarily meaning-focused language use. In contrast "exercises" are activities that call for primarily form-focused language use. However, we need to recognize that the overall purpose of tasks is the same as exercises -learning a language- the difference lying in the means by which this purpose is to be achieved.

It might be objected that this distinction is somewhat simplistic. As Widdowson (1998) has pointed out, learners will not need to pay attention to both meaning and form in both tasks and exercises. For example, learners involved in "making an airline reservation" will need to find the linguistic forms to explain where they want to fly to, what day and time they want to fly, what kind of ticket they want, etc. Also, learners completing a blank filling exercise designed to practice the use of the past simple and present perfect tenses in English will need to pay attention to the meanings of sentences to determine which tense to use. Widdowson argues that what distinguishes a task from an exercise is not "form" as opposed to "meaning", but rather the kind of meaning involved. Whereas task is concerned with "pragmatic meaning", i.e. the use of language in context, an exercise is concerned with "semantic meaning", i.e. the systemic meanings that specific forms can convey irrespective of context. However, it is precisely this distinction that the terms "form focused" and "meaning focused" are intended to capture, so Widdowson's objection is more one of terminology than substance.

The distinction between meaning-focused and form-focused is also intended to capture another key difference between an exercise and a task relating to the role of the participants. Thus, a "task" requires the participants to function primarily as "language users" in the sense that they must employ the same kinds of communicative processes as those involved in real-world activities. Thus any learning that takes place is incidental. In contrast, an "exercise" requires the participants to function primarily as "learners"; here learning is intentional. In short, as Widdowson (1998) notes, there is a fundamental difference between "task" and "exercise" according to whether linguistic skills are viewed as developing through communicative activity or as prerequisite for engaging in it. However when learners engage in tasks they do not always focus on meaning and act as language users. Nor indeed is this the intention of tasks. While a task requires a learner to act primarily as language user and give focal attention to message conveyance, it allows for peripheral attention to be paid to deciding what forms to use. Also, when performing a task, learners' focal attention may switch momentarily to form as they temporarily adopt the role of language learners. Thus, the extent to which a learner acts as language user or language learner and attends to message or code when understanding tasks and exercises is best seen as variable and probabilistic rather than categorical.