

## 8 DEBATE AND DISCUSSION

### 8.1 The ELT Journal/IATEFL debate: Tasks are nothing new. They're just exercises with a new name

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Chair: **Keith Morrow**

ELT Journal and IATEFL jointly sponsored a debate about the role of tasks in language teaching and learning. Guy Cook and Martin Bygate put forward their very different views after Sophie Iannou-Georgiou (Cyprus) and Paula Jullian (Chile) had presented some evidence about the ways in which tasks are (and are not) used in their countries. After the presentations, there was a lively discussion involving members of the audience.

#### What is happening in reality?

**In Cyprus: Sophie Iannou-Georgiou**

In an informal survey on the issue, 23 secondary and tertiary level teachers (both from private and state schools) were asked three questions:

	Yes	No
Have you heard of task-based learning (TBL)?	11	12
Do you know what task-based learning is?	9 1 (Maybe)	13
Do you use task-based learning in your teaching?	8 1 (Maybe) 2 (I think so)	12

I also investigated the National Curricula and Syllabi for English as a Foreign Language for the three levels of state sector education, and drew on interviews and on my personal experience.

In primary schools, teachers are pressed for time and their large classes, as well as their lack of training, mean that they do not often implement tasks.

In the lower secondary schools, the national curriculum implies the following roles for tasks:

- maximising learner talking time
- developing autonomy
- integrating the four skills
- promoting the development of the learner as a person

There is, however, no reference to task-based learning and the theory underlying it.

In the national curriculum for upper secondary schools there is no mention of tasks or processes behind language learning and production.

Recently, however, the introduction of 'Language Rooms' (multimedia centres designated for languages) has encouraged some use of tasks. The design of the rooms

inherently favours tasks through group work. Nevertheless, the tasks employed are nearly always research tasks, where the groups have to use the resources available to them in order to investigate a topic and then present it to the rest of the class.

So there seems to be a similar situation at all three levels of Cyprus state education. The national curricula and syllabi are not informed by TBL and when tasks are used, they focus on linguistic features and do not implement the underlying philosophy that linguistic skills will develop through the task.

#### In Chile: Paula Jullian

I reported on the results of a survey carried out with Chilean teachers working in the public sector, to find out how much they knew about tasks, and whether tasks were used in this context.

The first question of the survey was how much they knew about tasks, and according to their familiarity with tasks, the teachers were classified into the following categories. Those who:

- admit they do not know what tasks are
- say they know, but in fact they do not
- know but do not believe in tasks
- believe in tasks and use them with their learners.

There was a clear age factor – older teachers seemed to know less about tasks. The younger ones had seen them as part of their training, but had various misconceptions about them. Most did not see any difference between tasks, activities and exercises.

The survey showed a strong reluctance by teachers to give tasks to their learners for various reasons:

- Learners do not know how to deal with them.
- Learners do not have enough English, perhaps in the future when they can speak better.
- Learners do not like them.
- Learners turn to Spanish immediately or talk about other things.
- Usually one learner does all the work.
- Learners are not trained for this kind of activity.
- Tasks are difficult because our learners are used to the conventional teaching-learning style.
- Learners need a teacher standing in front of them and telling them what to do – it makes them feel confident.
- Our learners are not used to being responsible for their own learning.
- Parents and other teachers view them as too unconventional, not what is expected from the teacher and the learner.
- Learners like to have content written in their notebooks.
- Learners think the teacher is being lazy, leaving all the work to the students.
- Classes get too messy. You can't control large classes where they are going on.
- Learners take too long to understand what they have to do, and have too little time to perform the task.
- Learners don't follow instructions.

- Students learn at different levels, so they should be given different tasks – too much work.
- How do you mark them?

The answers are eloquent. It is remarkable that teachers almost unanimously blame external factors, especially the learners. They reveal much of their own teaching practice and their own fears.

#### **Supporting the motion: Guy Cook**

After some wild beginnings, task-based language teaching has, over the years, gradually become more sensible. The initial definitions of tasks have been gradually refined, until they have ended up as just what they set out to replace ... exercises!

At the outset, definitions of task were so vague that they seemed to include any kind of activity. One famous definition by Mike Long, for example, included 'painting a fence'. Other definitions, though they were about language teaching activities, seemed to include anything that might happen in the classroom during a language lesson.

Gradually, however, an apparently more sensible consensus emerged among task-based theorists, in which the definition of tasks seemed more constrained. Tasks were defined as 'real-world' activities in which student attention was focused on meaning, on a short-term outcome, and not on practice or display. But then gradually compromises were made with each of these criteria – ironically under the pressures of classroom reality!

First it was acknowledged that attention to meaning was only a matter of degree, and tasks were designed which actually set out to focus on form. Then the artificial nature of many tasks made their apologists acknowledge that they were not actually 'real', but bore 'some relation to' reality. Next there were suggestions that tasks could be repeated – making the first time round seem suspiciously like practice. Finally there were to be 'pre-task activities' – rather like the presentation phase preceding practice in traditional teaching.

Under these influences, tasks admittedly became more useful to the student. But the reason is simple. They had become exercises.

Why not? Exercises are an authentic way to learn. In them, there is no muddled attempt to deny the inherently artificial nature of the classroom. Language is broken down into manageable units, which can be practised until they are mastered, so that when the student does come to engage in real communication outside the classroom, they can do so with confidence and success. In the meantime, they can see what they are learning and can enjoy making progress.

#### **Opposing the motion: Martin Bygate**

The question is not whether tasks are a good type of language teaching activity, or whether we support the idea of completely task-based instruction (TBI).

The key distinction for our purposes is between the term 'task' and the term 'exercise'. Our use of these terms reflects the fact that it is helpful for us to distinguish between:

- activities which practise parts of a skill, a new subskill, a new piece of knowledge (*exercises*) and
- activities which practise the whole integrated skill in some way (*tasks*)

It is significant that all areas of the curriculum (sciences, humanities, technical subjects, sports) find it useful to make this distinction. Language education is no exception.

In our field the term 'task' refers to *learning activities in which learners are intended to use language pragmatically and strategically in order to achieve a non-linguistic outcome*. In contrast, an exercise is an activity, typically scripted, which is used explicitly to improve people's knowledge of an aspect of language, and their accuracy in processing it. Here the opportunity for pragmatic and strategic use is missing.

The distinction between tasks and exercises is not only a professionally useful one: the two types of activity are also *empirically* distinct. Recordings of students working on tasks show that their language in tasks is very different from their language in exercises. Hence it is not correct to say that tasks are only exercises.

Tasks are also a *new* development: they have led to new considerations about materials design and implementation. The concept of 'task' offers an addition to our repertoire of teaching procedures. To say they are only 'exercises with a new name' ignores the new contributions they can make to our teaching.

We should be increasing our awareness of different types of activity, not merging them all together. To reject the distinction between tasks and exercises is to ignore differences, and only look at similarities. Of course there are similarities; and there are questions to be asked about tasks. But to ignore the professionally significant differences would be misguided.

### **Points from the floor**

#### **Are tasks really different from exercises?**

- There is an inevitable tension between the need for authenticity in the communicative task and the focus on form required by the structuralist exercise. How is this resolved if no distinction is made between the two activities?
- Tasks and exercises are at different points on a continuum, not in opposition.

#### **Can you learn a language in a holistic way?**

- Traditional approaches are often condemned in the task-based literature for taking a 'discrete-item' or 'atomistic' approach to the teaching of structure. The alternative, so-called holistic 'focus on form' during communicative activity, sounds impressive. But how, actually, can you focus on structural points without looking at them one at a time?
- Supporters of exercises often draw on analogies with practising sport. But the classroom is not a tennis court; it is more messy than that. A lot is going on when we use language and looking at one element at a time may not be very helpful.

#### **Where does the learning come from in tasks?**

- How do learners learn when doing tasks? Where does the learning come from?

#### **Are tasks appropriate for all situations?**

- Are tasks not a Eurocentric luxury? Are they appropriate for use in the wider world where teachers have large classes and few facilities?

The debate continues on the OUP teachers' club Web site: <http://www.oup.com/elt/teachersclub>