TASK-BASED LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION Joko Priyana*)¹

There are several relatively innovative language instruction approaches such as Whole Language Approach (Blanton, 1992), Content-Based Second Language Instruction (Brinton, Snow and Wesche, 1989), Text-Based Syllabus Design (Feez, 1998), and Task-Based Language Instruction (for examples Prabhu, 1987a; Crookes and Gass, 1993; Willis, 1996). Of the approaches, task-based language instruction has probably received the most attention in the literature (for example Prabhu, 1987a; Newton and Kennedy, 1996; Foster and Skehan, 1999; Robinson, 2001; Bygate, 2001; Samuda, 2001).

This article, *Task-Based Language Instruction*, is the second of the three articles published in this bulletin discussing the approach. The general overview that includes the definition and the rationale of task-based language instruction will be outlined. Then, how task-based language instruction creates effective learning processes will be presented.

A. The General Overview

In brief, task-based language instruction can be described as a language course whose syllabus or teaching and learning activities are organized around tasks (Nunan, 1988a; Markee, 1997). Unlike conventional syllabuses that are oriented towards language as the primary subject-matter, a task-based language syllabus is oriented towards the process of language learning in the classroom (Crookes and Gass, 1993).

There are two types of categorization that have been used for syllabuses: synthetic and analytic. In the synthetic syllabuses such as lexical, structural, notional/functional and the majority of situational and topical syllabuses, the language is presented in discrete pieces, one piece at a time. This breaking down of the language into small pieces is assumed to make the learning task easier. In this type of syllabus, language learning is viewed as a process of gradual accumulation of learned discrete linguistic rules until the whole structure of the language is built up. Learners are to 're-synthesize' the separate pieces into a complete language (Wilkins, 1976). In analytic syllabuses such as task-based, process and procedural syllabuses, language chunks are presented at one time, without the separation of the language into discrete pieces. Instead of using discrete linguistic items as units of analysis as practised in synthetic syllabuses, analytic syllabuses use tasks as organizing units. An analytic syllabus assumes that the learners are able to

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perceive the regularities in the language exposed to them and acquire the rules by themselves. Learners are facilitated to employ their analytic capabilities in learning the language rules (Long and Crookes, 1993). A task-based syllabus is categorized as an analytic syllabus (Nunan, 1988a; Crookes and Gass, 1993).

Breen (1984) categorizes the orientation of language teaching into two areas, i.e. *equipping* the learners with a communication repertoire or a communication capacity and *developing* capacities needed by a communicator. Task-based language instruction belongs to the second category. With the *equipping* orientation, the syllabus is organized on the basis of forms, functions, or situations. With the *developing* orientation, on the other hand, the syllabus is organized around tasks and what is emphasized is developing the learner's capabilities in applying, reinterpreting, and adapting the knowledge of rules and conventions during communication by means of underlying skills and abilities.

Similarly, relating to Prabhu's (1987b) two procedures in education: *equipping* and *enabling*, task-based language instruction belongs to the *enabling* procedure. The *equipping* procedure refers to education whose aim is to equip the learners with the necessary knowledge, skills or behaviour patterns which are later needed in order to function in the society. Structural and functional approaches to language instruction belong to this category. *Enabling* procedures refer to education that aims at providing learners with the opportunity and support for realizing the learners' potential, in the form of understanding or ability. This procedure proposes the learners' future needs as varied and unpredictable. Hence, what is taught should not be specified on the basis of the learners' predicted future needs, but on the understanding of learning processes and of the learners' state at every stage. Prabhu, however, admits that relating some parts of the instruction to the learners' target needs may be advantageous.

The primary reasons for orienting learning towards process (the use of language learning tasks) rather than content (linguistic items) may be summarized as follows. First, as argued by Long and Crookes (1993), the assumptions underlying synthetic syllabuses, in this case linguistic content oriented learning, contradict the findings of SLA research. They state that while synthetic syllabuses assume that what is taught is the same as what is learned and that organizing and presenting language materials as discrete parts is efficient, the findings of second language acquisition research indicate that acquisition is not linear through the acquisition of separate linguistic items; linguistic items are learned simultaneously with language use. One cannot expect that students will acquire language rules in the same order as they are presented (see Ellis, 1985).

Second, content oriented syllabuses such as the syllabus of a functional/notional approach to language teaching are frequently created upon hypothetical learner needs analyses (Foley, 1991). The syllabus contents are often sequenced without taking learner differences into account. Task-based approaches to second language instruction, on the other hand, argue that second language learning is basically an internal, self-regulating process that will vary according to the individual. Learning cannot be specifically controlled by the syllabus or the teacher. A teacher is not always completely able to decide what is to be presented next on the basis of what was just taught. A more sophisticated way is by continuously following the development of the learners at every stage. What is to be taught next, which route, and what processes should be undertaken are decided as a result of understanding the learners' state at every given stage (see also Breen, 1984).

The third reason is derived from Vygotskyan psycholinguistics. Vygotsky (1962 cited in Foley, 1991) proposes that viewed from social context, speech is a means for maintaining individuality which can be achieved through three types of regulations in communication tasks called *object- regulation, other-regulation, and self-regulation. Object-regulation* refers to a situation where the environment directly controls the individual. *Other-regulation* is when a person is controlled by another person, and *self-regulation* refers to a state when people employ speech to control themselves and others. The last type of regulation implies that the person possesses a mature linguistic ability. However, it does not necessarily mean that the person fully masters the language; rather the individual with self-regulation ability is capable of recovering and utilizing strategies acquired earlier.

Next, it is believed that language is most effectively learned and taught through the use of language in communication (Crookes and Gass, 1993). Through the use of task-based instruction, learning tasks are organized in order for students to get opportunities to use the target language in comprehending and conveying messages in their interactions with their teacher and classmates, and in understanding the learning materials. In performing a task, learners, in collaboration with their interlocutor(s), are engaged in a process of achieving a predetermined goal. In such a process, learners are facilitated to comprehend their interlocutor's messages and produce the target language for expressing themselves.

In addition, from the input and interactionist point of view, participation in conversations that involve interactional modifications promotes learners to get the input they need for acquisition (e.g. Long, 1983; Pica, 1994; Foster, 1998). In her review of studies of negotiated interaction, Pica (1994) suggests that interaction promotes conditions and processes that are necessary in SLA. Task-based language instruction employs tasks that engage learners in interactions that are expected to increase the comprehensible input the learners receive and comprehensible output they produce.

In its development, task-based language instruction has undergone some changes, particularly in its views of syllabus design and grammar instruction. In terms of syllabus design, there are at present two versions of task-based language instruction, *strong* and *weak* forms (Skehan, 1996; Markee, 1997). In the *strong* form:

... tasks should be the unit of language teaching, and [that] everything else should be subsidiary. In this view, the need to transact tasks is seen as adequate to drive forward language development, as though second language acquisition is the result of the same process of interaction as first language acquisition (Skehan, 1996, p. 39).

In the *weak* form, it is considered that:

... tasks are a vital part of language instruction, but that they are embedded in a more pedagogic context. They are necessary, but may be preceded by focused instruction, and after use, may be followed by focused instruction which is contingent on task performance (Skehan, 1996, p. 39).

The *strong* version may be regarded as the original view of task-based language instruction syllabus design and the *weak* version reflects the changed form. According to the *strong* version, the learners are considered to be able to acquire the target language through task completions as in first language acquisition. In the *strong* version, tasks present language as a whole, not particular part(s) at a time as in language teaching methods or approaches with a synthetic syllabus (Long and Crookes, 1993). On the other hand, the *weak* version proposes a need to focus on form either before or after task completion or both. This form of task-based language instruction may also be used to teach pre-selections of linguistic item (Markee, 1997). What differentiates the *weak* version of task-based language instruction from communicative language teaching is that task-based language instruction allocates more opportunities for student activity and less explicit, up-front instruction (Willis, 1996).

B. How Task-Based Language Instruction Creates Favourable Learning Conditions

A literature review (Priyana, 2006) looking at the learner language, the roles of input, output, and explicit grammar instruction as well as the significance of individual differences shows that a number of principles need to be considered in developing a sound second or foreign language instruction. The principles include:

- 1. Making errors is natural and is considered as a part of the process in acquiring the target language.
- 2. Exposure to comprehensible input is crucial.
- 3. Learning tasks facilitating learners to engage in interactions are essential.
- 4. Learners need to be encouraged to produce the target language as producing the target language facilitates learning.
- 5. Although language production may be encouraged from the early stage in the learning process, it is reasonable to allow a silent period.
- 6. Focus on form is necessary.
- 7. Second language teaching and learning pace should be made reasonable for both learners with higher and lower aptitude.
- 8. Language learning tasks should be varied to cater for the needs for both extrovert and introvert learners.
- 9. Learning tasks should encourage learners to attend to both meaning and form and be varied in order to accommodate learners with different learning strategy preferences.
- 10. Teaching and learning processes should foster motivation and minimize learner anxiety.
- 11. The choice of teaching and learning tasks and content (subject matter) should be based on learner age.
- 12. Learning tasks should arouse and maintain learners' learning motivation.

The following discussion shows how task-based language instruction reflects the principles in its practice. But first, it is necessary to look at frameworks for task-based language instruction.

1. Task-based language instruction framework

The literature proposes a number of frameworks for task-based language instruction (for example Nunan, 1985; Prabhu, 1987a; Skehan, 1996; Willis, 1996). The frameworks generally suggest that task implementation or completion involves three stages: pre-task, task, and post-task stages. The *pre-task* stage refers to the stage where the learners prepare for the task completion. In this stage, the learners may be:

- a. exposed to the target language or provided with the language support that is necessary for the task completion (Richards, 1999; Willis, 1996; Skehan, 1996; Nunan, 1985; Prabhu, 1987)
- b. given an opportunity to understand the task goal or outcome and procedural aspects of the task (Richards, 1999; Willis, 1996; Skehan, 1996; Prabhu, 1987a)
- c. familiarised with the topic or schema (Richards, 1999; Willis, 1996; Skehan, 1996; Prabhu, 1987a)
- d. given time to plan the task completion (Richards, 1999; Skehan, 1996).

The *task* stage refers to the stage where the learners do the 'main' learning activity that may include processing, producing, or interacting in the target language (Nunan, 1985). A wide range of tasks can be used. In this stage the learners perform the activity by themselves (Prabhu, 1987a). Generally the learners have to understand the task input in order to complete the task.

Finally, the *post-task* stage is the phase after the main activity is completed. In this stage, the task outcomes are assessed and feedback is given. A number of post-task stage activities are possible such as follows.

- a. Public performance: learners are to perform the task in front of the class or another group (Willis, 1996; Richards, 1999; Skehan, 1996), or teacher
- b. Consciousness-raising activities (Willis, 1996)
- c. Practice of words, phrases, patterns, and sentences (Willis, 1996)
- d. Teacher-led work correction
- e. Feedback delivery: the teacher gives oral or written feedback on the task outcomes and the accuracy of the learners' language
- f. Doing a related task that can be completed right away or as homework.

Figure 1 displays an example of a task-based instruction framework from Willis (1996). This framework consists of three stages, i.e. *pre-task, task*

cycle, and *language focus.* This framework is based on the belief that an effective language classroom should provide the learners with sufficient language exposure and opportunities for meaningful language use, generate motivation, and allow explicit language instruction.

Pre-task (including topic and task)			
The teacher			
 introduces and defines the topic 			
 uses activities to help students recall/learn useful words and phrases 			
 ensures students understand task instructions 			
 may play a recording of others doing the same or similar task 			
<u>The students</u>			
 note down useful words and phrases from the pre-task activities and/or the recording 			
 may spend a few minutes preparing for the task individually 			
Task cycle			
Task	Planning		Report
<u>The students</u>	<u>The students</u>		<u>The students</u>
• do the task in pairs/ small	 prepare to report to the 		 present their spoken reports to
groups. It may be on a	class how they did the		the class, or circulate/display
reading/listening text	task and what they		their written reports
<u>The teacher</u>	discovered/decided		<u>The teacher</u>
• acts as monitor and	• rehearse what they will		• acts as chairperson, selecting
encourages students	say or draft a written		who will speak next, or ensuring
	version for the class to read		all students read most of the
	The teacher		written reports
	 ensures the purpose of the 		 may give brief feedback on content and form
	• ensures the purpose of the report is clear		
	 acts as language advisor 		 may play a recording of others doing the same or similar task
	 helps students rehearse 		doing the same of similar task
	oral reports or organize		
	written ones		
Language focus			
Analysis Practice			
The students		The teacher	
 do consciousness-raising activities to 		• conducts practice activities after analysis	
identify and process specific language		activities where necessary, to build confidence	
features from the task text and/or		<u>The students</u>	
transcript		 practise words, phrases and patterns from the 	
• may ask about other features they have		analysis activities	
noticed		• practise other features occurring in the task text	
<u>The teacher</u>		or report stage	
• reviews each analysis activity with the class		enter useful language items in their language	
 brings other useful words, phrases and patterns to students' attention 			notebooks
patterns to students' attention			
 may pick up on language items from the report stage 			
report stage			

Figure 1: Task-based instruction framework (Willis, 1996, p. 22)

2. How task-based language instruction creates favourable learning conditions

Task-based language instruction creates conditions reflecting the principles listed earlier and other favourable learning environments in its three phases of task completion: pre-task, task, and post-task stages. In turn, how each stage creates the conditions is discussed. In addition how motivation is raised and maintained and how grammar is addressed will be dealt with.

a. Pre-task stage

In the pre-task stage, comprehensible input is provided (*principle 2*) and language support including grammar is given (*principle 6*). As presented earlier, the *pre-task* stage basically refers to the stage where the learners prepare for the task completion. One of the activities in this stage is exposing the learners to comprehensible target language or providing the learners with language support (Richards, 1999; Willis, 1996; Skehan, 1996; Nunan, 1985; Prabhu, 1987a). The target language that is exposed is generally part of the task, that is its input. The language support that is given can be vocabulary and/or form that are necessary for the task completion.

Task-based language instruction provides comprehensible input and ensures that the input is comprehended in a number of ways or mechanisms. First, task-based language instruction employs various oral and written text types with different topics that are relevant to the learners' needs. With regard to oral texts, learners are not only exposed to formal language like formal speeches and lectures, but also informal use of language such as chats. A proportional variation of genres with various topics will make quality language exposure for the learners (Willis, 1996).

Second, in task-based language instruction, a task can be successfully completed only when the learners understand the input that is part of the task. This requirement encourages the learners to comprehend the input by employing various strategies, such as asking for help from the teacher or classmates. In this way, comprehensibility of language exposure in task-based language instruction is ensured. The completion of a task should follow the comprehension of the task input. Third, task-based language instruction ensures the provision of sufficient and quality comprehensible language exposure through the employment of authentic or adapted written and oral texts. When authentic texts are used, they are selected from those that are suitable to the learners' level of proficiency. When adapted texts are in use, various adaptation techniques such as linguistic and non-linguistic aids (Krashen, 1987), or text elaboration (Yano, Long and Ross, 1994; Ellis, 1994) can be applied.

Fourth, task-based language instruction, especially the strong version, encourages the use of natural language (as contrasted to grammatically sequenced exposure). This allows the occurrence of particular linguistic items again and again. This mechanism offers a natural recycle which provides opportunities for the learners to hear and learn the previously encountered items many times (Krashen, 1987). In addition, this may serve as a reinforcement function.

b. Task-stage

In this stage of task completion, many of the principles referred to in section 2.2 are realised as the learners do the 'main' learning activity. First, in many cases the learners try to understand the task input (especially when comprehending task input is not part of the pre-task stage activity). In this way, principle 2 is realised.

Second, through task completions the learners process, produce or interact in the target language (*principles 2 and 3*). As the definition of task suggests, task-based language instruction engages the learners in processing, understanding or manipulating the target language, or thinking, producing or interacting in the target language in order to achieve a communication or pedagogic goal.

Producing the target language for expressing meanings in interactions by the learner is considered crucial in the learner's fluency and accuracy development. First, producing the target language provides the opportunity for both practising language knowledge meaningfully and for developing automaticity in its use (Johnson, 2001). Second, it can generate responses from the interlocutors and native speakers that can provide the learners with information about the comprehensibility or accuracy of their utterances. In addition, it may force the learner to move from semantic processing to syntactic processing (Swain, 1985 in Kowal and Swain, 1997). According to the output hypothesis, producing

language either spoken or written can trigger the students to "move from semantic to syntactic processing" (Kowal and Swain, 1997, p. 287). Task-based language instruction promotes the optimum use of the target language.

Task-based language instruction employs a wide range of tasks both communicative and form focused. Varied tasks both meaning oriented and form focused (see for example Willis, 1996) requiring the learners to process, produce, and interact in the target language well accommodate both introvert and extrovert learners (*principle 8*). As both meaning and form oriented tasks are involved, task-based language instruction also well addresses learners who like learning grammar to support their language development. In this case, the instruction suits learners with different learning styles, i.e. those who prefer learning through using the language for communication and those who feel confident when learning the target language is supported by grammar instruction (*principle 9*).

It should be noted, however, that in the early stages of learning where the learners may still be in the 'silent period' (see Saville-Troike, 1988) or simply shy to speak, tasks requiring the learners to produce simple written language (words, phrases and single sentences) may be more appropriate. It does not mean, however, that producing spoken language is discouraged. Tasks that have the learners express thoughts using one-word or simple sentence expressions may be used. One of the ways to facilitate spoken language production in the early stages is asking the learners to read their written language. After labeling pictures, for example, the learners are given an opportunity to tell their class their answers. In this way, while the 'silent period' is allowed (*principle 5*), language production is encouraged even at the early stage of learning.

The deployment of communicative tasks in task-based language instruction is aimed at creating opportunities for the learners to use and test their hypotheses about the target language. In accordance with that aim, making linguistic errors during task completions is allowed (see *principle 1*). Errors that are made while the learner is performing a task are not corrected straight away. Error corrections are not encouraged whilst the learners are trying to express themselves. The learners are given a chance to use the target language with minimum or no disruptions from the teacher correcting errors. Error corrections, or language feedback, are done after the task completion at the post-task stage. This mechanism can, at the same time, minimise learner anxiety (*principle 10*).

Tasks are completed individually, in pairs, or in small groups. Only few tasks, if any, are teacher-led. In this way, although they may be restricted by time as determined by the tasks, learners can complete them at their own pace (*principle 7*). Slower learners are free to follow their own pace, whereas the faster learners can be given enrichment tasks while waiting for the slower learners to finish their tasks. In fact, letting the learners do tasks individually or in groups at their own pace does not put the learners under pressure and is one of the ways of minimising learner anxiety (*principle 10*).

c. Post-task stage

In this stage, the task outcomes are assessed and feedback is given through various activities. First, the learners may do a public performance (Willis, 1996; Richards, 1999; Skehan, 1996) where they perform the task again with the class, another group, or teacher as the audience. Thus the learners have another opportunity to use and possibly interact in the target language (*principles 3 and 4*). Second, learners may have language focus activities such as consciousnessraising activities (Willis, 1996), practice of words, phrases, patterns, and sentences (Willis, 1996) (*principle 6*). Third, the learners can be involved in work correction that corrects both content and, in particular, language (*principle 6*). Fourth, the teacher may give feedback with regard to the learners' language accuracy (*principle 6*).

d. Motivating learners

Whether instrumental or integrative, one's learning motivation is an important drive both to process the input exposed to the learner and practise using the target language. It is only with the learner's willingness to process the input and use the target language that the learner will take advantage of the learning process (Willis, 1996). The question is how task-based language learning creates a favourable context to generate reasons for learning that can lead learners to do learning activities for a specific goal and to sustain the effort until the goal is reached. Anticipating that most learners have no long-term goals, task-based language instruction can generate at least continuous short-term reasons and goals of learning in several ways. First, task-based language instruction can employ tasks that are communication-oriented. The communication goal(s) as determined in tasks would create reasons for the learners to do an action that can lead to learning. As the tasks are communication-oriented, the learners are not too burdened with language accuracy which often discourages them (Cameron, 2001). Second, task-based instruction can create a balanced proportion of use between communication- and form-oriented tasks. This will allow a balanced development between fluency and accuracy (see *principle* 6). Third, task-based language learning can employ various interesting tasks of which types and contents are relevant to the learners' characteristics, including age and personality (see principle 11). These tasks could keep learning activities interesting, and thus sustain motivation. In addition, when these tasks have the 'right' level of difficulty, every task can give an experience of success to every learner. This experience can strengthen the learners' motivation. In addition, the use of various tasks and the deployment of a balanced proportion between meaning- and formfocused tasks could satisfy learners with different learning styles or preferences (see *principles 8 and 9*).

e. Addressing grammar

There are a number of ways of addressing form in task-based language instruction (Nunan, 1985; Prabhu, 1987a; Skehan, 1996; Willis, 1996; Richards, 1999). Grammar can be addressed at all stages of the task completion: pre-task, task, and post-task stages. At the pretask stage, form or accuracy can be addressed in two ways: introducing or equipping the learners with the linguistic items that are necessary for the task completion and reducing the cognitive load of the task (Prabhu, 1987a; Willis, 1996; Skehan, 1996; Richards, 1999). While the former provides the learners with language support (Richards, 1999), the latter reduces the processing load the learners will experience while completing the task (Skehan, 1996) so that they can allocate more attention to the accuracy of their language. The former can be accomplished through implicit or explicit instruction of linguistic items (Nunan, 1985; Skehan, 1996; Willis, 1996; Richards, 1999) such as reading relevant texts, classifying relevant words and phrases (Willis, 1996; Richards, 1999), brainstorming activities (Willis, 1996), and consciousness raising tasks (Skehan, 1996). The latter can be done through various techniques such as the following:

- 1) Ensuring that the learners understand the task instruction, goal and expected outcomes (Willis, 1996)
- 2) Giving time to the learners to recall schema (Skehan, 1996)

- 3) Giving an opportunity to the learners to rehearse the task (Richards, 1999; Prabhu, 1987a)
- 4) Giving the learners time to plan the completion of the task (Richards, 1999; Willis, 1996)
- 5) Letting the learners watch the completion of comparable tasks on video or listen to or read the transcripts of the completion of similar tasks (Willis, 1996).

At the task stage accuracy can be encouraged through a number of ways such as the following.

- 1) Choosing tasks where the level of difficulty is right the tasks are not too demanding but not too easy (Skehan, 1996)
- 2) Informing the learners that accuracy is required or that particular structures are to be used prior to task completion (Skehan, 1996)
- 3) Providing the learners with task completion supports such as pictures and diagrams (Skehan, 1996; Willis, 1996; Richards, 1999)
- 4) Dividing task completion into sub-tasks in order to be more manageable (Richards, 1999)
- 5) Recording the learners' performance in completing a task and letting the learners identify and improve their weak aspects (Richards, 1999; Willis, 1996).

At the post-task stage accuracy can be facilitated through techniques such as follows.

- 1) Having the learners perform the task in front of the class or another group (Willis, 1996; Richards, 1999; Skehan, 1996), teacher, or camera (Skehan, 1996)
- 2) Having the learners repeat the task with some modification of its elements such as reducing the amount of time allocated for the completion (Richards, 1999)
- 3) Making the learners aware that in addition to fluency, restructuring and accuracy are essential (Skehan, 1996)
- 4) Giving oral or written feedback on the accuracy of the learners' language product.

Such techniques are likely to reduce the learners' attention to task goals and procedures and thus enable them to allocate more attention to their language.

C. Conclusion

This article has briefly showed how Task-Based language Instruction, a language teaching and learning approach compatible with the Communicative Language Teaching, creates learning conditions required for effective second language acquisition. First, the definition and the rationale of the approach are presented. Second, the framework for task-based learning is outlined. Finally, how the task-based language learning promotes language learning is demonstrated.

Considering that the instruction effectively creates conducive conditions to language learning in all stages of instruction, it is recommended that the instruction be applied. Practical steps of task development and instruction delivery will be presented in the coming volume.

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