

## Unit One

### Theoretical Underpinning of Task-based Assessment

#### 1.1 What is task-based language teaching?

##### Reflect

*Before reading what we have to say about task-based language teaching, see if you can come up with your own definition of 'task'.*

*What is the difference between the items in the two lists below?*

List A	List B
Put a series of questions and answers in sequence to form a dialogue and then practise it with someone else.	Call the front desk of a hotel and complain about the air conditioning.
Fill in the blanks in a reading passage with appropriate words.	Order a meal in a restaurant.
Study the following multiple choice questions and select the correct response.	Call a friend and invite him or her to the movies.

The answer to the question lies in the outcome. Both List A and List B involve the use of language. For List A, a successful outcome will be couched in language terms. Did the person put the questions and answers in the correct order? Did they put grammatically and semantically acceptable words in the blanks? While the items in List B also involve the use of language, a successful outcome will be something other than the production of a piece of language. It will be a correctly adjusted air conditioning system, food and drink on the table, a pleasant social evening with a friend. The communicative acts in List A are language exercises. Those in List B are real-world tasks because they are the kinds of things that we do through language in our everyday life.

The focus on tasks in language teaching came about as a result of a greater understanding of why and how language learners go about learning a second / foreign language. Until the late 1960s it was assumed that knowing a language could be equated with having internalized the rules underlying the language. The focus was primarily on teaching structures and learners were assessed on how well they could demonstrate their knowledge of the structures and how well they could manipulate them.

The 1970s, however, saw a major shift in focus away from **form** to **meaning**. Gradually it became accepted that the major reason for learning any language, which is, to convey meaning, should be reflected in what happens in the classroom. This realization had a significant effect not only on how language was analysed, but also

on the way language could be ‘broken down’ in terms of functions rather than form for teaching purposes. The ‘communicative activity’ which, as Skehan (2003) points out, became replaced by the term ‘task’ in the 1980s, became a teaching unit, impacting on teaching, syllabus design and textbook writing.

When real-life tasks such as those in List B (above) are transformed from the real world to the classroom, they become pedagogical in nature. A pedagogical task, then, is a classroom undertaking “...where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome” (Willis and Willis, 2001: 173). In other words, it is “a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form” (Nunan, 1989: 10).

Skehan (1998), drawing on a number of other writers, puts forward five key characteristics of a task:

- meaning is primary;
- learners are not given other people’s meaning to regurgitate;
- there is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities;
- task completion has some priority; and
- the assessment of the task is in terms of outcome.

Let us now compare these key characteristics with those features identified in the *CDC Syllabus for English Language (Secondary 1 - 5) 1999* p. 43:

- a task should have a purpose. It involves learners in using language for the kinds of purposes that are described in the chapter on Learning Targets and Objectives;
- a task should have a context from which the purpose for using language emerges;
- a task should involve learners in a mode of thinking and doing;
- the purposeful activity in which learners engage in carrying out a task should lead towards a product; and
- a task should require the learners to draw upon their framework of knowledge and skills.

There is a close relationship between these two lists. Both emphasize the need for tasks to engage learners in meaningful communication.

### **Reflect**

*Brainstorm, either by yourself, or with several other people and create a list of 6–8 real-world tasks that you have carried out in the last 24 hours.*

*Take one of these and think of how it might be transformed into a pedagogical task, e.g. as a role play, simulation or problem-solving task. Then indicate how your task meets the key characteristics identified above from the **CDC Syllabus for English Language (Secondary 1 - 5) 1999** p. 43.*