

*A Framework for Task Selection: Criteria for the successful selection of communicative tasks in the language classroom*

Maurice JAMALL

Three and a half decades ago, at the beginning of my career—and doubtless along with most every other inexperienced teacher—the majority of the classes I taught routinely failed to achieve their stated goals. Despite the fact that I believed that I had planned the lessons carefully, the students failed to, or as I saw it at the time, refused to engage with the materials. One such lesson was listen-based. The text selected consisted of a series of short and seminal clips from history: Neil Armstrong’s, “*One small step for man ...*”, Winston Churchill’s, “*From the Baltic, to the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent*”, and Dr King’s, “*I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed ...*”. Who couldn’t find this fascinating? A second lesson—discussion-based—required students to prioritize six potential recipients for the one available heart. Do you choose the 55-year-old mother of two or the 23-year-old medical student? The aim was to provide students with the opportunity to debate and discuss; spoken fluency practice in an interesting and challenging context. Yet contrary to expectations, this lesson too was found dead on arrival; barely a word was uttered.

The blame for the lesson’s lack of success was placed squarely at the feet of the students. Clearly, it was their duty to engage enthusiastically with the material, take advantage of the many learning opportunities provided and reap the benefits of a carefully planned and executed lesson. However, this was an erroneous conclusion to reach. In reality, the success or otherwise of any class is based on the interaction of not one, but three components: the teacher’s planning and execution of the lesson, the students’ willingness and ability to effectively engage with the teaching

materials and lesson organization, and finally, the selection of appropriate texts and tasks that will facilitate meaningful interactions and therefore create meaningful learning opportunities.

This paper focuses on the third component and proposes a framework which teachers can apply to task selection and may improve the overall learning outcomes of the lesson.

### **Task-based learning: An Overview**

It is generally agreed that the origins of task-based learning (TBL) can be attributed to the work of N.S. Prabhu and the famous ‘Bangalore Project’ conducted in the early 1980s. At its core, proponents of TBL argue that learners best acquire language when they are focusing on communication rather than ‘studying’ discrete language items in isolation; students learn by doing. By engaging in meaningful activities, learners are more likely to develop control over the language system as well as communicative fluency in the four macro-skills. Briefly, the central components (and assumptions) of TBL are as follows:

- *Communication First*

Learners are encouraged to focus on successful communication. If communication has succeeded, then that is what matters most. In essence, ‘never let the imperfect be the enemy of the good’. So, if in response to the question, ‘What did you do yesterday?’ the learner responds, ‘Yesterday, I am go Shibuya,’ then that is absolutely fine. The message was successfully decoded, and a suitable response uttered.

- *Language in Context*

Learners are more likely to retain new language and develop linguistic fluency of already or partially known language when it is presented in meaningful, familiar contexts, rather than in discrete, isolated packages. The focus is very much on the practical application of the target language and the particular macro-skill involved. An example might be

a communicative task where students are asked to tell or write the story behind a scar that they have on their body (see: Jamall, pp 58-59).

• *Motivation*

“*Motivation is the process that initiates, guides, and maintains goal-oriented behaviors*” (Cherry, 2023). There are essentially two kinds of motivation: *Extrinsic* and *Intrinsic*. In the language learning context, extrinsic motivation is where the reason for wanting to learn a language comes from outside the student. An example of this would be the office manager who has been assigned to the London bureau. She has no particular interest in the UK or British culture, but she knows that she has to be able to communicate successfully with the locally hired staff. Her reason for taking English classes is so that she will be able to perform her duties. Had she been assigned to Paris instead of London, she would have enrolled in French classes. By contrast, intrinsic motivation is where the learner wants to master the target language because of a deep interest in or passion for the target culture. In this case, the learner enjoys speaking the language, and wants to know more about the speakers’ culture for its own sake, for pleasure. (For a comprehensive discussion of motivation and language learning, see Dornyei, 2021).

• *Fostering Learner Autonomy*

There is (in my view) no such thing as, ‘a class’, ‘a group of students’; these are spurious and ultimately unhelpful terms. In each (language) classroom there is a collection of individuals with different needs and wants. They will be at different stages of linguistic and communicative competence, have different interests and views, and may or may not share preferred learning styles. Given this reality, fostering learner independence and autonomy, that is handing over—wherever possible and fruitful—control of the learning process to the student, will greatly assist and facilitate language acquisition. Giving students a degree of autonomy allows them to develop confidence, become more sophisticated learners and be better able

to explore and experiment with different learning styles and strategies, ultimately becoming more successful language users.

### **TBL: One Theory of Learning**

Any classroom activity must be grounded in a theory of learning which then informs an approach to teaching. For instance, the (now discredited) audiolingual method assumes (among other things) that students' errors are not an inevitable and necessary stage of the language acquisition process, rather they interfere with and potentially prevent learning and must therefore be avoided. When errors occur, they must be *punished* (that is, identified and then corrected immediately).

TBL draws on several theories of learning including that proposed by Lewis (implicitly in 1993 and explicitly in 1997). He argues that learners best acquire language when engaging in a three-stage cycle of learning: Observe—Hypothesise—Experiment (OHE). Briefly the role of each stage is as follows:

#### *Observe*

At this first stage, the learner observes discrete language points presented in a broader context, beyond the sentence level, in a text created with a communicative purpose. This allows her to see the language at work and what is needed for effective communication. An example of this might be formulation of the past simple tense. A learner reads a (short) text, say, "What John did yesterday". She notices that many past tense verbs are formed by the addition of the 'ed' suffix.

#### *Hypothesise*

This is the second stage where the learner forms an hypothesis: based on the text just read, she concludes that the past tense in English is formed by the addition of the 'ed' suffix. Therefore, when wishing to communicate a past event, use an 'ed' form of the verb.

### *Experiment*

At this third stage, the learner uses the target language in a communicative task (either written or spoken). She has formed an hypothesis and is now ready to apply it, to experiment with her deduction that ‘ed’ communicates a sense of past. This experimentation may result in either positive or negative feedback. For instance, she says, “Yesterday I arrived at school at 7:30” and her interlocuter replies, “Wow, that’s early!” Positive feedback, the hypothesis is correct. However, when she says, “I goed to school by bus,” the hearer gives her a quizzical look. Negative feedback. Now she knows that she needs to return to the first stage (our, “What John did yesterday” text). Upon doing so, she observes that while many verbs take ‘ed’, others do not. So she creates a revised hypothesis: While most English verbs add ‘ed’ to form the past tense, there are many others that do not. They change, often radically; no generative rule can be formulated. The past form of many verbs must be learned one by one.

TBL then, allows students to develop and improve both linguistic competence and linguistic performance. However, at the heart of any success is the teacher’s selection of appropriate learning tasks and it is to this issue that we now turn.

### **Criteria for task selection**

Central to the planning stage of any lesson is the selection of appropriate material. Whether this is deciding which exercises in a textbook to use (or avoid) or developing one’s own materials, teachers must be fairly confident that the selected tasks and activities will meet the learning or indeed, social goals. For instance, take the very first English class of the year / term at a university. The people in the room (teacher included) do not know one another; they may well be excited, but also a little bit nervous about what lies ahead. The teacher’s first objective then, is to do something to break the ice and start to put the students at ease. In order to achieve this goal, the following activity may be selected:

**Find Someone Who ...**

**NAME**

- has an older sister (Do you have...?)
  
- plays a musical instrument (Can you play...?)
  
- has been to a foreign country (Have you ever been...?)
  
- likes getting up early (Do you like...?)
  
- likes football (Do you like...?)
  
- has a pet (Do you have...?)
  
- can say the alphabet in less than 10 seconds (Can you say...?)
  
- has seen three or more *Harry Potter* films (Have you seen...?)
  
- went to a boys-only or girls-only high school (Did you go...?)
  
- is the youngest in their family (Are you ...?)
  
- has already joined a club (Have you already...?)
  
- lives alone (Do you live...?)

The students mingle and ask the Yes/No questions of as many of their classmates as they can in an allotted time. Whenever they receive a ‘yes’ answer, they write down the student’s name and then ask a follow-up question should they wish to. Notice that question stems have been provided. This relieves some of the pressure of performing the task and is advisable since the primary objective is *not* linguistic, but *affective*, that is to help the students relax into the lesson and begin to become comfortable with each other.

The above task then, is selected based on an *assumption*: that the students will (1) not know each other particularly well and (2) be a bit nervous, certainly at the beginning of the lesson. Successful task selection requires teachers to choose materials based on three core assumptions: (a) the schematic; (b) the systemic; (c) the interpersonal. These three

criteria will be discussed in more detail with reference to the following teaching activity:

*Communication Task: Work in small groups. Choose from any countries in the world to create your perfect lifestyle. You can only use a country once.*

A(n) _____ house	A(n) _____ education
A(n) _____ car	A(n) _____ husband / wife
_____ food	_____ clothes
A(n) _____ watch	_____ wine

The communicative activity above is an example of a task that can be used across a broad range of classrooms as it satisfies the three assumptions thus allowing for students to engage in meaningful communication, specifically:

#### *Schematic*

This refers to the learner's knowledge and understanding of the world which they bring to the classroom. In the case of the above task, the teacher must assume that most (adult) students will have a fair idea of what different countries do well. They will probably have their own preferences, their own dislikes.

#### *Systemic*

This refers to the learner's explicit knowledge of the target language system, its grammar, vocabulary, phonology and so on. In order to perform the above task successfully, the teacher must assume that the students have a reasonable command of the following (note: this is not an exhaustive list):

- a. How to form the adjectives for countries.
- b. Language to express likes and dislikes (*I like / don't like; I prefer X to Y*).

- c. Adverbs such as *very* and *really*.
- d. The use of conjunctions such as *so* and *because*.
- e. The present and past simple tenses.

### *Interpersonal*

This refers to the *intimacy demands* intrinsic to the task, how willing the learner is to reveal personal feelings, thoughts and opinions. The task allows students to communicate meaningfully and share their personal thoughts and opinions. Crucially, the teacher must make a value judgement, a value assumption, if you will; that the task does not involve having to reveal anything too intimate or sensitive; it is a non-threatening task. After all, there is nothing quintessentially wrong about preferring Italian wines to French, or Indian food to Chinese. At the same time, the activity is personal enough to allow students to discover something of value about each other making communication more memorable and meaningful and is therefore more likely to foster language acquisition.

Let us now further examine the three criteria with reference to failures in the classroom. The six comments below could well have been made by teachers who have had a communicative task/teaching example fall flat in their classroom. The cause of the failure can be traced to the teacher making inaccurate assumptions with regard to the three criteria at the planning stage of the lesson, that is failure to take into consideration the schematic, systemic and interpersonal assumptions that underpin each potential learning event. Here, I invite the reader to consider where the problem may lie:

- a. I told the students that Kathmandu is an exotic city, but they still couldn't get the meaning of *exotic*.
- b. I put the students in groups to discuss what they would do if they won

\$10,000,000, but all they said was things like, “buy nice house”; “go to travel”; “buy Ferrari”.

- c. I put the students in pairs and asked them to describe their ideal girl/boyfriend. Keiko and Satoshi hardly said a word to each other.
- d. I put the students in pairs and asked them to rank these Frank Zappa albums in their order of preference: *Overnight Sensation*; *Joe’s Garage Act 1*; *Sleep Dirt*; *Hot Rats*; *Zoot Allures*; *Sheik Yerbouti*. They couldn’t do it.
- e. I put the students in groups and asked them to tell each other the plot of a film or book they really enjoyed. Nobody said very much at all.
- f. I put the students in groups and asked them to first make a list of things that they have done in their lives of which they are still very ashamed and then to rank them from most to least serious. The silence was deafening.

Ans: (a) schematic; (b) systemic; (c) interpersonal; (d) schematic; (e) systemic; (f) interpersonal

Examples ‘a’ and ‘d’ fail because of schema. In the first instance, the teacher has assumed that the students will share her own idea of what exemplifies ‘exotic’. In the second, the silence in the classroom has nothing to do with the students’ linguistic competence and everything to do with the fact that they know nothing about the artist and his work; they simply have nothing to say since the works of Frank Zappa do not form any part of their schema.

Examples ‘b’ and ‘e’ fail because of a lack of linguistic competence. The tasks require a level of language ability that is beyond the students’ capabilities. Put simply, while the students may have plenty to say, they do not have the linguistic tools, sufficient knowledge of the language system

to perform the task and engage in meaningful communication.

Examples 'c' and 'f' fail because of the interpersonal dynamic. At first glance, both topics offer students the opportunity to communicate in quite complex and challenging ways, offering the opportunity to use quite sophisticated language. However, the intimacy demands are too great. The students were ultimately unwilling to disclose parts of themselves to their partners who are not close friends, but rather a group of random people thrown together by pedagogic fate. The potential loss of face, the personal cost of using the language is simply too high.

### **Additional Criteria**

There are additional factors which, although largely subsumed in the three primary criteria above, deserve to be explicitly stated. They include the following:

#### *(a) Age appropriateness*

The content of any material should be suitable for the age group in terms of accessibility and linguistic content. For example, (very) young learners may be embarrassed or shocked by the use of 'taboo' language. Similarly, a reading/listening text on the pros and cons of home ownership will likely be impenetrable.

#### *(b) Cultural sensitivity*

Some subjects are off limits since they may cause discomfort or in extreme cases, even provoke anger. There are obvious topics (sex & sexuality, politics, and religion, readily spring to mind) however, some may equally fail to engage the students despite appearing fairly innocuous. A popular 'describe and draw' communicative activity is the one where Student A describes the layout of her room and her partner, Student B, draws the plan. This activity is often unsuccessful in the Japanese context since the home is a far more private and personal space than in many 'Western' cultures.

(c) *Interest level*

Regardless of the macro-skill, the materials and task need to be of sufficient interest such that the learners are, at the very least, willing to approach the activity with a positive attitude.

(d) *Time constraints*

Be aware of how long the task will probably take. Make sure that you have sufficient time in the lesson for the students to successfully approach and complete the task. (Note: As a rule of thumb, plan no more than 90% of the time allotted. So, for a 100-minute lesson, plan a 90-minute class and allow ten minutes for the unforeseeable).

(e) *Adaptability and flexibility*

An often-overlooked factor, but one of practical value to teachers is the ability to recycle and reuse tasks across a range of levels and for different teaching objectives. Consider the above task: At lower levels, it may be used to give students practice in using target structures and vocabulary (see: a—e above). However, at much higher levels, the task can be used as a lead-in/warm-up activity to a reading or listening lesson based around the theme of cultural stereotypes/stereotyping.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Success in the language classroom, is dependent on three factors: the teacher, the learners and the teaching materials selected. In order to facilitate learning and to create learning opportunities, it is incumbent upon the teacher to choose appropriate materials that will allow learners to engage meaningfully with the language and with other learners. When task selection is reached following accurate schematic, systemic and interpersonal assumptions, there is a greater likelihood that the students will be provided with learning opportunities that will promote language

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learning, improving both linguistic competence and performance.

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