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Task-based learning with children

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Abstract

This chapter gives an overview of task-based leaning with an emphasis on child learners. Both research and pedagogic tasks are covered and various definitions and examples of tasks are discussed. Differences between tasks for adult learners and tasks for children are explored. Some design features of classic tasks are analysed more closely with a focus on task demands and task supports. The chapter also covers findings from studies which have examined challenges of task implementation in primary classrooms from teachers' points of view. It is suggested that future work involving task-based learning with children should be more context-embedded and should incorporate children as active task creators as well as probe into children's views about tasks.

Keywords: tasks, research tasks and pedagogic tasks, task demands, task supports, children's views, child-created tasks

(A)Introduction:

Task-based learning in different variations has become very popular indeed all over the world in English language teaching although often there is 'a gap between pedagogic policy and classroom practice' (Garton, Copland and Burns 2011). Task-based language learning is regarded as more meaningful, more communicative and more purposeful than 'traditional' learning that relies on mechanical exercises, rote learning and the PPP (Presentation/Practice/Production) lesson structure. In task-based lessons learners are likely to engage with the learning materials more enthusiastically and thus develop their language skills more efficiently. Although there is a growing body of research about task-based learning for younger learners, most of what has been written about language tasks concerns

adult learners, so we still know very little about how children of different ages in different formal or informal learning contexts engage with and benefit from language tasks and how these task are actually used in classrooms. This chapter aims to review what we know from both research and practice about the benefits of task-based language learning with children. The chapter also discusses task design issues for young learners and highlights ways in which tasks may be incorporated into language classrooms. The chapter concludes with issues and priorities for future research.

(A)Research Tasks and Younger learners

Language learning tasks have been defined and used in various different ways both in the more practical teacher development literature and the academic research literature (e.g. Skehan 1996, Ellis 2003, Nunan 2004, Willis and Willis 2007, Samuda and Bygate 2008). Language learning tasks, historically, grew out of the communicative language teaching approach (the 'CLT' approach) and thus they share concerns with CLT about the importance of meaning, genuine communication and real life-like experiences in the classroom. Tasks are often contrasted with more rigid language exercises that lack tangible purpose and appeal. The underlying principle behind both CLT and task-based learning is that authentic learner interaction, motivated engagement and purposefulness are important in making progress in language learning. Kumaravadivelu (2006: 66) suggests that tasks are in fact an 'offset of CLT'. Samuda and Bygate (2008: 69) in their comprehensive overview of definitions conclude that a task is 'a holistic activity which engages language use in order to achieve some non-linguistic outcome while meeting a linguistic challenge, with the overall aim of promoting language learning through process or product or both.'

For example, a typical task might be to find five differences between two similar pictures. Learner A has a version of a picture and Learner B has the same picture but with five differences. They cannot look at each other's pictures but instead by describing them and asking and answering questions about them, they jointly identify the five differences. This is a classic speaking task that involves two-way communication and it has a clear non-linguistic

goal which is to find the differences and solve the puzzle. If it is played in a classroom where several pairs of students are carrying it out at the same time, it can be set up as a competitive task. There will be a winning pair, those who are first to identify the five differences correctly.

Within SLA research, tasks have been used as elicitation tools for data collection to answer questions about features of talk that emerge as a result of using certain types of tasks. Researchers have used tasks to explore how speakers negotiate meaning when there is a communication breakdown, or how they compensate for gaps in their knowledge by employing different communication strategies, such as compensatory strategies. Those researchers interested in language processing, have looked at how learners' L2 fluency, accuracy and linguistic complexity might be affected when working with different types of tasks. Such research is also aimed at identifying patterns in learners' output related to different types of language tasks. One popular area within this research domain is exploring the effect of planning time and task repetition. Given the opportunity to repeat a task or to have some time to plan what one is going to say is likely to enhance the performance, for example in terms of the speaker's fluency, grammar or choice of words and phrases.

Much of this adult-focused research is conducted in the psycholinguistic tradition (see, for example, Skehan and Foster 1999, Bygate 1999) focusing on large numbers of participants and often comparing several tasks, or examining the effect of particular variables such as planning time, interlocutor type or learners' familiarity with the task. These studies report trends and general patterns based on large data sets, using statistical analyses and they do not focus on the unique features of individual performance. On the other hand, sociocultural perspectives reject the idea that tasks determine patterns of output but instead they put the emphasis on how individuals approach and make sense differently of the same task. These studies are more qualitative in nature and are focused on fewer learners. In this qualitative research tradition, tasks have been used to explore the nature of collaborative dialogue that emerges from task-based interactions as learners work together on joint problem-solving tasks, talking through aspects of language they are not sure about, scaffolding each other's

output or externalizing their knowledge for consolidation (for example Swain and Lapkin 2003, Ohta 2001).

Most published studies with children in the domain of English as a second language (ESL) in the task-based literature have been an extension of adult studies, and have tended to focus on children's abilities to negotiate meaning on classic gap tasks. All these studies have confirmed that ESL children are able to work with and benefit from tasks even though the exact benefits may be different from adults. For example, Oliver (1998 and 2002) compared the interactions of children (aged 8 to 13) and adult dyads (pairs) and found that they differed in the number of negotiation strategies that were used. Young learners employed far fewer comprehension checks than did adults and tended to rely heavily on self and other-repetition. This was interpreted as a developmental effect, in that young learners might be more concerned with constructing their own meaning than clarifying meaning for their partner. In Oliver's studies the children employed a variety of negotiation strategies. Non-native speaker pairs (NNS-NNS) produced more clarification requests than their native speaker – non-native speaker (NS-NNS) counterparts and more occurrences of negotiation of meaning in NNS-NNS dyads were found than in NS-NNS dyads. This was because in the NS-NNS dyads the NS were considered to be 'experts' whereas in NNS-NNS dyads children saw each other as joint problem solvers. In another study Mackey, Oliver and Leeman (2003) found that 24 dyads of young ESL learners (NNS-NNS pairs) produced significantly more modified output than the 23 adult NNS-NNS pairs. This means that when they negotiated meaning with each other not only did they manage to overcome the communication breakdown but on top of that they also corrected each other, which led to improved/modified language output. Also, the amount of negative feedback and the opportunities to use feedback were comparable between the two groups suggesting that children were able to modify their input by directly making use of feedback from their peers.

In some studies adult interlocutors interacted with children using various tasks. Mackey and Oliver (2002) studied 22 young ESL learners (aged 8 to 12) interacting in dyads with adult NS, performing five different communication tasks. Their results indicated that

young learners who were provided with interactional feedback, in other words the adult NS reformulated input and targeted new language at the children's specific needs, showed greater improvement in English question formation than those who interacted with the adults but did not receive such targeted feedback. This study was replicated in Singapore by Mackey and Silver (2005) with 26 young Chinese learners (aged 6 to 9) and reported similar positive results between the provision of interactional feedback and L2 development of question forms.

Just like in the literature on adult students, different variables that are likely to influence the task-based performance are often isolated and placed under scrutiny in an experimental research design. Such a variable is, for example, familiarity with task content. In Mackey, Kanganas and Oliver's study (2007: 306) children were shown to be willing to take more linguistic risks when they were familiar with the content of a task. They negotiated more meaning and produced more modified output when working with familiar tasks, as opposed to new, unfamiliar tasks. Whilst this literature on task-based learning, which is largely based on experimental studies with ESL as opposed EFL children, is immensely informative, findings will have to be taken cautiously when interpreted for EFL contexts where language levels and exposure to English is very different indeed.

Some more qualitative studies have also been undertaken indicating that children are able to scaffold/support each other in dialogic tasks even in EFL contexts but such peer-scaffolding differs from teacher-learner scaffolding (e.g. Guk and Kellogg, 2007). In another study Pinter (2005) showed that Hungarian ten-year-old children were able to support each other with peer-correction at a very low level of competence and they also got better at paying attention to each other through repeating versions of a 'spot the differences' task. Similarly, in a Canadian ESL classroom (Gagne and Parks, 2013) grade 6 children were observed providing varied scaffolding to peers as they worked with cooperative tasks such as jigsaw tasks.

(A)Pedagogic tasks and Young learners

The discussion has so far been focused on academic research on tasks as elicitation tools which serve as a means of data gathering. Teachers, of course, are mostly concerned with tasks as vehicles for meaningful learning and practice in classrooms. While in reality these two orientations need not be in opposition with one another, many writers find it useful to differentiate between research tasks (as elicitation tools in research) and pedagogic tasks as 'workplans' (Ellis 2003) that teachers plan and implement in order to challenge traditionally PPP-oriented structures of teaching. Task-based sessions are usually broken into three stages: pre-task, during task and post-task phases. According to Willis (1996) the pre-task phase is devoted to an initial exploration of the topic. The teacher might pre-teach some new language or play a recording of others doing the task. Then the main task phase contains different sub-phases, such as the students working in pairs or groups solving a problem and then putting a report together for the whole class to listen to. Finally, in the post-task phase there is a focus on form and some language analysis and awareness raising about language structures that emerged as problematic during the task phase. Different authors describe the task cycle slightly differently and offer different frameworks for task types (see for example Nunan 2004).

One popular framework is that proposed by Willis and Willis 2007. In addition to specifying text-based tasks, Willis and Willis (2007) talk about generating tasks based on topics such as 'Travel' or 'Pets'. The following types of tasks are suggested: listing, ordering and sorting, matching, comparing, problem solving, sharing personal experience, project and creative tasks. The authors suggest that a particular topic might run for several lessons and will involve a sequence of different tasks. The task cycle described earlier may take shape based on a concrete topic: 'Volcanoes'. The teacher might start by showing some pictures of volcanoes and eliciting personal comments from the class about their experience and their knowledge about volcanoes. Then subsequent tasks might involve *listing* features of volcanoes, *labelling* a cross-section of a volcano, then *comparing* different volcanoes, *making quizzes* about them or *writing creative stories* about them. Task-based teaching always begins with a preparation and priming phase (where the teacher introduces the topic, and sometimes

new vocabulary), then during the target task phase the learners undertake tasks such as a class survey or a project, and finally, there is an opportunity to reflect and focus on form. Such delayed focus on form is argued to be more beneficial than focusing on form upfront, since the learners can see how the need arose for the use of those forms and the language is both contextualized and personalized.

One way to think about classroom tasks/ pedagogic tasks for young learners is that they can be the same as those designed for adults. For example, the above-mentioned Willis and Willis (2007) categories can be used in children's classrooms as well with appropriate content. Cameron (2001: 32) writing about tasks for young learners recommends a three-stage approach, as recommended with adult learners. Task implementation for children involves: the pre-task phase, the target task phase and the follow-up phase, but Cameron also stresses the need to balance 'task demands' and 'task supports'. The difference between task demands and task supports is the space for growth and opportunity to learn (Cameron 2001: 22-25). Cameron (2001) further highlights that tasks for children should have coherence and unity, meaning and purpose, a clear language-learning goal, a beginning and an end, and they should involve the learners actively. Legutke, Müller-Hartmann and Schocker-v. Ditfurth (2009: 38-43) similarly suggest that tasks for children should be challenging, should promote active, playful and creative participation, and confidence and willingness to take risks. Tasks may have the potential to contribute to developing learners' autonomy and responsibility through choice and repetition. Tasks for children will also integrate different language skills. In addition to the four skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing) other skills might include miming, role-playing, drawing, cutting out and crafting. Legutke et al. illustrate these task characteristics with an example where a teacher introduces a picturebook to a class of young learners (see also Mourão, this volume, for further discussion of the potential and challenges of picturebooks with young learners).

More fluid pedagogic tasks for children are often reminiscent of language games. Indeed studies that have explored games with children also report higher levels of

engagement and motivation and they emphasize the importance of the primacy of meaning over form and a genuine purpose. In one recent study, Dourda, Bratitsis, Griva and Papadopoulou (2014) examine a complex online game where young learners in a CLIL (content and language integrated learning) classroom in Greece work together to solve a set of problems. As they play the game and look for clues, they come across phrases that they can make sense of in context, and because of the repetitive nature of game-playing moves, they have a good chance of learning new language. They progress to higher and higher levels in the game over the course of several lessons. The study indicates that children are deeply engaged and motivated, which is always an aim when working with tasks. Complex online games are hard to incorporate into everyday teaching, but even a simple, everyday game such as the well-known 'Simon says' (a Total Physical Response game suitable for the youngest children where they follow instructions and mime actions but only if the instruction was prefaced by the words 'Simon says') displays features of a communicative task in that the game is meaning-focused, there is a clear goal that is non-linguistic (the aim is to try not to be caught out), and yet it provides useful language practice in listening and following instructions, from very basic to potentially quite complex.

Van Gorp and Bogaert (2006: 82) suggest that learners need motivation to invest their energies in a task, in other words, tasks need to inspire young learners to work with the language. The challenge is to design tasks that children want to complete: learners work in groups and try to work out solutions to problems that interest them. For example, Van Gorp and Bogaert mention that mysterious problem-solving tasks might be attractive to children, such as 'Strange footprints have been found near a bed of lettuce. Someone has eaten the lettuce. Do the footprints belong to a mole?'(page 83)

Another idea is to embed tasks within a story, such as, for example, transporting children into various periods of history and getting them to solve a puzzle in each historical era. While the tasks are motivating and fun, they also link to target curricular goals. Since the language use grows out of the puzzle or the problem, learning happens by confronting gaps between the young learners' existing linguistic repertoire and what emerges as a need/ gap

while talking about the puzzle with others. Different learners may run into different challenges and in small groups there may be a wide array of opportunities for each learner to benefit from this type of task work. Tasks like these inherently elicit interaction and feedback, and peers can add to each other's motivation to tackle the task. Peers can also act as sounding boards for ideas, opinions and can push their partners to produce cognitively and linguistically modified, better quality output. Van Gorp and Bogaert (2006: 97) also note that the roles that children take up, their relative status in the group, their personalities, the extent to which they are willing to cooperate and support each other and their interpretation of the task are so influential that the same task performance in two different groups always results in two different stretches of interaction. So, consequently, the teacher's role in monitoring and facilitating the task-based work is essential.

(A) Task demands and difficulty

How should teachers select tasks for their learners? What challenges or demands are hidden in different tasks? These could be linguistic demands, social demands, cognitive or metacognitive demands. Does the task require, for example, that two learners work together and exchange information? If yes, at least two issues seem important. Do the children have relevant language to activate in order to communicate their content and do they have the required maturity as speakers to package their information, listen carefully to their partner and monitor the task performance? Children should be able to ask themselves questions like this: Do I understand what my partner is saying? Should I check/ask the same question again if I did not quite understand what was said? What is important information and what is not? How do we know we are doing well so far with this task? What do we do if we get stuck?

Robinson (2001:30) discusses three different types of difficulties with tasks. The first group of variables relates to cognitive factors and these refer to attentional, reasoning and memory demands. The more complex information you need to remember and justify, for example, the harder the task. Task difficulty is also related to how much practice children may have with a task. If you repeat the same task several times or get dedicated time to plan,

the task becomes easier and more familiar. The second category of difficulties comprise interactive factors such as whether the task is closed or open (i.e. there is only one answer versus various answers), 1-way or 2-way (i.e. both partners talk or only one partner talks and the other one listens)and what the relationship is like between the learners. In the case of children one consequence of this is that friends who are comfortable with each other and who can work with a familiar task will find their experience easier. The final category of difficulties includes confidence, motivation, anxiety, intelligence, aptitude and cognitive style. These are learner attributes that are hard to change, so an anxious, less motivated learner will find the same task harder than a learner who is relaxed, happy and confident, ready to take risks. This is why teachers of young learners need to cultivate a positive and relaxing learning environment in order to reduce the possibility of negative attitudes.

When designing or selecting tasks, teachers need to analyze which features of the task represent specific difficulties, and whether it might be necessary or possible to adapt the task so that the children are better supported. For example, many speaking tasks, such as 'telling a story' or 'describe and draw' tasks, require a good grasp of referencing which means differentiating carefully between various items or elements in the task (Yule 1997:38). If the story is about a group of people or animals, it will be important to make reference to them in a way that is unambiguous to the listener as to which character is being talked about. But even in a simple 'spot the differences' task, it is important to locate and refer to an item correctly, especially if there are several similar items within the picture. During the task performance it is also important to monitor progress strategically depending on the task demands. A whole set of basic social skills (such as how to work well in pairs, how to listen to one another, how to ask for clarification, how to collaborate) are also necessary for most pair and small group tasks, and typically younger children need a great deal of support with these challenges.

Table 6.1 summarizes some inherent difficulties in four classic tasks and suggests possible ways in which the task can be made easier.

(Table 6.1 here)

Table 6.1 Examples of difficulties in four tasks

TASK 1	TASK 2	TASK 3	TASK 3
Spot the differences Find 5 differences between the two pictures (A and B) of the same castle. You can talk together but cannot look at each other's pictures.	*Write a story together* Listen to a story and take notes. Then together with your friend, reproduce the story as close to the original as possible.	*Describe and draw* Learner A draws a picture of a playground but does not show it to learner B. Learner B asks questions so that he/she can reproduce the same picture.	*Tell a story based on pictures* Look at the 5 pictures and tell the story.
A two-way gap task	**A collaborative writing task (dictogloss)**	**A one-way gap task**	**A monological task**
Difficulties: • Establishing what the other learner has or does not have. • Asking clarification questions and insisting on accuracy. • Realizing that the differences need to be carefully tallied.	Difficulties: • Brainstorming content and language together. • Listening to and evaluating each other's ideas. • Making decisions about who is writing, what to look up in the dictionary and what to ask the teacher. • Working through a	Difficulties: • Describing the picture in sufficient detail so that the listener can make sense of it. • Sorting out misunderstandings, e.g. by paraphrasing. • Listening carefully and responding to questions. • Using effective	Difficulties: • Setting the scene and introducing the characters. • Structuring the plot step by step, making sure there is a beginning, a middle and an ending. • Judging the right amount of information required from the

	draft. • Noticing mistakes and making improvements.	communication strategies to compensate for lack of language.	listener's point of view.
Support/adaptation: • Include fewer differences. • Include fewer items and thus less referential challenge. • Remind the children to search systematically. • Remind the children to count the differences.	Support/adaptation: • Provide some notes from the oral storytelling. • Brainstorm some key phrases from the story as a whole class activity. • Check first drafts and give feedback. • Discuss good strategies together before writing begins. • Provide dictionaries. • Get children to work in bigger groups first to share writing plans.	Support/adaptation: • Specify how many items the picture needs to contain. • Specify the level of detail needed in locating items. • Remind children of key clarification questions they can use. • Take out location and just include isolated numbered items.	Support/adaptation: • Brainstorm main ideas and phrases together as a class. • Put the pictures in the correct order. • Use fewer pictures. • Provide a skeleton text. • Give planning time. • Get children to plan in pairs or groups. • Use a story with a simple plot and fewer characters.

Whilst it is important for teachers to think carefully about the difficulties tasks entail, it is also important not to underestimate what children can do in contexts that make sense to

them even with very little language. Some research suggests that task-based learning is in fact possible with children who are complete beginners and thus have no knowledge of the L2 at all. A study conducted with six-year-old Japanese children with no prior knowledge of English (Shintani 2012) indicates that meaning focused input-based tasks (such as 'listen and do' tasks) are possible to implement at very low levels of proficiency and indeed children learn new language effectively if the task is repeated and thus allows for multiple exposure to the same language/ language chunk. In Shintani's study the teacher used a mixture of Japanese and English (L1/L2) to give the instructions to begin with and then gradually reduced the use of L1 as the children began to be able to respond to the task, first non-verbally and then with some basic unanalyzed L2 chunks (Shintani 2012).

(A) Teachers and task-based learning

Tasks, although extremely popular with teacher educators and widely recommended, can also be a source of concern for teachers. Butler (2011) reports that in Asian classrooms, where large classes are the norm, teachers lack confidence to work with tasks. In addition, when children see little relevance of English to their own lives with hardly any opportunities for real interactions outside classrooms, engaging with genuine communication and experiencing authentic language practice is often less attractive than in ESL contexts.

Deng and Carless (2009) explored the extent to which primary English teachers' practice in China reflected principles of TBLT and they found that very limited evidence of task-based practice. Teachers were not in favour of it, and tasks-based teaching is perceived as too complicated. Butler (2011) comments that TBLT remains an unresolved issue in many parts of Asia, for example, because it is difficult to reconcile it with the exam culture. Carless (2002, 2004) explored the implementation of TBLT in Hong Kong elementary schools and identified some common problems in classrooms where teachers were implementing task-based learning. These issues include difficulties in maintaining discipline during the task cycle, learners' excessive use of their mother tongue, and a large variety across the board in terms of production of the target language. Teachers did not truly believe

in task benefits and did not fully understand tasks. There were serious time constraints in the timetable and some teachers therefore did not even attempt time-consuming tasks or tasks that did not match the more traditional textbooks. Many teachers also stated that there were no adequate resources in their schools to plan for task-based teaching. In a further paper Carless (2009) suggests that perhaps it might be advisable to productively combine PPP and TBLT in a way that teachers can minimize the limitations that PPP may have, instead of completely dismissing it. This is a measured and balanced suggestion that takes into account the social realities of particular contexts.

(A)Future directions: context and technology

Most current EFL materials incorporate some form of task-based learning or games for children. In some current course materials online activities are becoming common. For example, children might be asked to select a picture and describe it by recording their own voice and upload this spoken performance to a website (for example *Fotobabble*). This is a meaningful monologic task that is highly motivating because children can choose their own pictures and they describe something that is personally relevant and meaningful to them. Before uploading the spoken text file, children are likely to practise their monologues several times to be able to upload a polished version. When all children in the class have uploaded their descriptions, a further sub-task may be for each learner to choose two to three favourite descriptions and give feedback to peers. This is purposeful and meaningful learning with a clear goal and since individual choices are made, the task is also motivating.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and online materials offer some new ways in which children can learn from tasks. In fact recent research (Pellerin 2014) suggests that even very young learners are able to make use of advanced ICT technology in classrooms and can create their own meaningful tasks. Pellerin (2014: 4) suggests that 'the issue of task-based language learning linked with the use of these new touch screen and mobile technologies in the primary language classroom (children aged 5-12) is very much under-explored'. Individual tasks created by children represent a more dynamic concept of

task and authenticity. An example cited by Pellerin is a task that two Grade 1 learners initiated while playing with their puppets. They acted out a dialogue using the puppets and then decided to record their puppet show on the class tablet computer. Other children liked this idea so they took turns to record different puppet shows which then generated meaningful and truly authentic practice, and served as authentic listening material for the entire class. The whole experience increased their motivation and the frequent listening and viewing allowed these children to have some rich language practice, but also to begin to reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses as learners. Seeing yourself on the screen can provide that distance you need to enhance reflective skills. Handling the tablet computer and being able to make original recordings also gives children some control over their learning. Once young learners have ownership and control over a task, they will be motivated to invest into it.

More research is needed in the future with children as task users and even task creators in language classrooms, especially in EFL classrooms. More empirical evidence is also needed through longitudinal studies about how tasks of all kinds actually work, what language output they help to activate and what children feel or think about them. The majority of task research has targeted task outcomes as a result of design and much less has been done about the context of unique classrooms where task performances are shaped by the interaction between task and context. In this respect Batstone (2012) calls for a more context-embedded approach to TBLT, documenting what actually happens to task performances over long periods of time, across several lessons and units of learning. Research has started to explore what teachers know and think about tasks but we know virtually nothing about children's own views and interpretations of tasks. Some new innovative methodologies are needed to tackle this since children's perspectives are lacking in EFL/ESL (Pinter 2014). For example, we need research into children's insights about what tasks they enjoy and why, how they collaborate using different interactive tasks, and what they think they can learn from them.

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