Tasks Should Form the Backbone of the Communicative Curriculum

For each of the "I" statements below, indicate which applies to you:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>YES: FOR SURE!</th>
<th>SORT OF</th>
<th>NOPE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I can state the difference between an Exercise, an Activity, and a Task.</td>
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<td>2. I can identify a Task when I see one.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. I understand the difference between an input-oriented Task and an output-oriented Task.</td>
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<td>4. I can state the difference between Tasks as drop-ins and Tasks as the goals of units.</td>
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<td>5. I understand what it means to determine what students need to know and what they need to be able to do in order to be successful with a task.</td>
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The principle at the center of this chapter focuses on the kinds of communicative events that instructors might use in the classroom:

*Tasks—and not Exercises or Activities—should form the backbone of the communicative classroom.*

In this chapter we will explore:

- The nature of tasks.
- The difference between a Task, an Exercise, and an Activity.
- How the teacher can use Tasks to construct a communicative curriculum.

The following exercise comes from a college-level textbook that claims to have a communicative approach:

Restate the question using inversion.

1. *Est-ce que vous parlez espagnol?*
2. Est-ce qu'il étudie à Paris?
3. Est-ce qu'ils voyagent avec des amis?
4. Est-ce que tu aimes les cours de langues?
5. [several more items like these]

The following activity comes from another college-level textbook that makes the same claim:

Interview your partner and find out what he or she did last night.

Almost all contemporary language textbooks are full of "activities" like these. And yet, they are not communicative at all or, at best, are "partially" communicative.

The focus of this chapter are those kinds of events in class that actually promote communication, thus falling under the rubric of communicative. We'll begin by first reviewing our definition of communication from Chapter 1. (Have you noticed how our definition of communication seems to crop up in every chapter?)

Communication is the expression, interpretation, and sometimes negotiation of meaning in a given context. Communication is also purposeful.

As we concluded in Chapter 1, if teachers and students are not engaged in the expression and interpretation of meaning, what they're doing is not communicative. But there is more. If there isn't a communicative purpose to what they're doing, then teachers and students may not actually be engaged in a communicative event.

To review: What's a communicative purpose? People generally use language for one or both of the following purposes:

- **psychosocial**: to establish and maintain relationships; to grease the wheels of interactions (e.g., saying 'hi', asking how someone is doing, complimenting someone, inquiring about the family, asking what plans someone has just to be nice)

- **cognitive-informational**: to learn something new about other people and the world around us (or to confirm information); to obtain information in order to complete another task (e.g., to ask if anyone needs anything at the store because we're on our way there and can get it for them, to explain how to use the new washing machine, to deduce who could be the killer and who is innocent, to read instructions in order to put something together)

We also touched on the idea that communication may be used to entertain. So let's return to the two activities above from two books claiming to represent a communicative approach. Are these activities communicative? They are not. Why not?

First and foremost, they contain no expression or interpretation of meaning. In the first activity, the learner is simply changing the question from one form to another. We could insert nonsense words, and the student could still perform the activity. We will see later how this works when we discuss Exercises. And, of course, the activity lacks any communicative purpose: There is no psychosocial or informational-cognitive communicative purpose underlying what students and teachers are doing. And I doubt anyone is trying to entertain anyone. The activity's sole purpose is to explicitly practice making questions using inversion. Students and teachers are not finding out anything about each other. Nor are they building relationships through this "interaction."

In the second activity, students seem to be communicating. By having to talk about what they did last night, aren't they expressing and interpreting meaning? Maybe. Let's imagine the students simply going through the motions. One student says, "I studied." The other says, "I watched TV." Neither is saying much and we're not even sure they're paying attention to each other. But let's assume they are. So perhaps they're expressing and interpreting some kind of meaning. Here comes the all-important second question: What's the purpose of this activity? Why is Ellen asking Alex what he did last night, and why is Alex asking Ellen the same? We have no idea. Neither do the students—well, that's not quite true. Most teachers and students would see this activity as just one more way to "practice the past tense." So, again, focus is not on communication, but the practice of a particular linguistic feature. This activity thus has no communicative purpose.

These activity types clearly show that just because mouths are moving in a classroom does not mean that students and teachers are engaged in any kind of communicative event. This is crystal-clear in the first activity. In the second activity, just because students are doing "pair work" doesn't mean they are engaged in a communicative event or are communicating. **Pair work is not necessarily communicative.**

You are probably asking, "Then, what is a communicative activity?" In the next section, we will review what are called "Tasks" and contrast them with what are more typical in the language classroom: Exercises and Activities.

“Just because mouths are moving in a classroom doesn’t mean that students and teachers are engaged in any kind of communicative event.”
Tasks in the Language Classroom

Tasks are the quintessential communicative event in contemporary language teaching. The exact definition of tasks varies somewhat among scholars, but at the kernel of all definitions you’ll find the following:

■ Tasks involve the expression and interpretation of meaning.

■ Tasks have a purpose that is not language practice.

In this chapter we will discuss the kinds of Tasks I believe work best in contemporary language classes. I have a bias, though: I teach at the college level, so the Tasks I use reflect that context (setting and participants). Keep this in mind as you read.

Let’s start with two Tasks for beginning language courses, so you, the reader, do not conclude that Tasks are something for more advanced work. I have used the Task “At What Age?” at a number of workshops. (By the way, my reason for capitalizing Tasks will become clear a bit later.)

At What Age?

Step 1: Write down at what age you think a person typically does each of the following activities:

1. A person graduates from college at the age of ________

2. A person gets married at the age of ________

3. A person has a first child at the age of ________

4. A person dies at the age of ________

Step 2: Now interview someone in class. Ask him or her questions to find out how they answered each item. Here’s a model to help you. Jot down next to your answers above what your partner says!

MODEL: OK. At what age does a person graduate from college?

Step 3: Listen as your instructor leads a discussion on your answers. In a minute, you may learn something new! [The instructor then asks a student from each pair how they answered the questions, writing their answers on the board, e.g., “Bobby. What did you say was the typical age for graduating from college? And what did Melinda say?” The instructor then asks the class to determine the mean for each age for each question. Once that is calculated, the instructor then reveals data from the latest U.S. census.]

The second Task comes from my own classroom experience. During the first week of a course, I would collect information on students to have some very basic bio-data about them. It dawned on me that I could have the students themselves do this, so I converted the collection of the information into a Task the students could do.

For Your Instructor

Step 1. Look at the information below. You will fill it in with information you obtain from a fellow student and turn it in to your instructor.

Step 2. Think about the questions you will need to ask your classmate. If you are unsure, raise your hand, and your instructor will help you.

Step 3. Now pair up with someone. As your partner answers the questions, jot the information down on a sheet of paper. You can then enter this information neatly into the box afterward.

My name is __________________________

Profile of My Classmate

My classmate’s name is __________________________
He/She is from ____________________________

He/She major is __________________________

He/She is taking these classes this semester:

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________

He/She is taking a total of ___________________ credits/hours this semester

His/Her favorite class is ______________________

At the end of this Task, the instructor collects the information and keeps it handy as a way of knowing some basic things about his/her students.

What makes "At What Age?" and "For Your Instructor" Tasks? Do they contain expression and interpretation of meaning? Yes, they do. In both Tasks, the students must say something, and someone else must pay attention to it in order to respond. At the same time, the person who asks the questions must pay attention to the response, because it is needed a bit later in the task. So clearly students are expressing and interpreting meaning.

Is there communicative purpose in these Tasks? The answer, again, is yes. In both cases the purpose is cognitive-informational.

- The purpose of "At What Age?" is to find out when we think certain life events happen. Then we compare our thoughts to actual government data, to learn something about the world around us. Students (and workshop participants) are often surprised at the actual typical ages for these data. For example, the age of having a first child is lower than the age at which most people marry! (I often follow up with data from other countries as a brief cultural comparison.)

- The purpose of "For Your Instructor" is to provide the instructor with basic information on the class. Who are these students? What are their majors? What are they taking this term? How "busy" are they with classes? All of this is potentially useful to the instructor. Rather than simply have students fill out a card and provide this information, I ask students to do it for me. Thus they are engaged in a communicative event with a cognitive-informational purpose: to provide particular information to me, the instructor, about another student.

Let's contrast Tasks, then, with Exercises. Here is the first textbook activity we looked at in this chapter:

Restate the question using inversion.

1. Est-ce que vous parlez espagnol?
2. Est-ce qu'il étudie à Paris?
3. Est-ce qu'ils voyagent avec des amis?
4. Est-ce que tu aimes les cours de langues?
5. [several more items like this]

What makes this an Exercise and not a Task? The characteristics of an Exercise are:

- There is no focus on the interpretation and expression of meaning.
- The purpose is to practice language.

In this particular Exercise, students can do what is asked of them without paying attention to meaning. How do we know this? We can substitute nonsense words, and the Exercise is still doable. For example, Est-ce que vous cavez espagnol? → Cavez-vous espagnol? Cavez is a made-up word, yet I can transform the est-ce que question into a question with inversion. Likewise, I can simply invent silly sentences with real words that make no sense and do the same. For example, Est-ce que vous mangez des pierres? → Mangez-vous des pierres? The question asks if you eat rocks. I don't know about you but I have never asked this question in my life. It is nonsensical. Yet, I can make the transformation from one question type to another as I work my way through the Exercise.

And don't think that, just because you make the sentence more relevant to the student or to "real life," it is somehow more communicative. For example, the first item is perfectly fine in this regard: Est-ce que vous parlez espagnol? "Do you speak Spanish?" This is a perfectly fine question to ask someone at a cocktail party, a job interview, or even during class. But no one is actually asking a question here! We are not at a cocktail party, we are not at a job interview, and in class we are not positing this question because we want to know who speaks Spanish. Instead, we are transforming one kind of sentence into another.

We are practicing. We are not engaged in the expression or interpretation of meaning.
So Exercises lack any intent to express or interpret meaning, and the sole purpose of Exercises is to explicitly practice language. The point of the Exercise we just reviewed is to practice inversion in French. The underlying belief behind Exercises is that students need to practice vocabulary and grammar as "part of learning to communicate," but we know this belief is wrong. As we saw in Chapter 2, what is normally taught and practiced as grammar isn't what winds up in people's heads. And, as we saw in Chapter 3, learners don't get a linguistic system in their heads from practice (and this includes vocabulary). They get it from a complex interaction between input and the internal mechanisms that act on input.

Here's the other activity we reviewed:

Interview your partner and find out what he or she did last night.

Is this a Task? No. At first blush it appears the activity involves the expression and interpretation of meaning. Let's assume it does have such a focus—that learners try to find out from each other what they did last night. But why do I want to know what my partner did last night? Why am I asking this information and why is she answering me? It has no communicative purpose. At best, it is partially communicative, in that it seems to have a focus on the expression and interpretation of meaning, but it lacks a purpose other than to practice language.

I call these kinds of activities exactly what they are: Activities. I use a capital 'A' with Activities here to differentiate them from activities with lower case 'a,' which refers to activities in general; Activity with capital 'A' refers to these partially communicative activities just described. (Now you can figure out why I also use capital 'E' for 'Exercise' and capital 'T' for 'Task'.

Earlier I said, "At first blush it appears the activity involves the expression and interpretation of meaning." Why "at first blush? Why this caveat? Learners do not always treat Activities as acts involving the expression and interpretation of meaning. Based on teachers' behaviors and expectations, students often discern that Activities are just "more language practice" and treat them as such. (Review the samples from students in Chapter 1 in which, during their pair work, they are clearly not treating Activities as communicative.)

To summarize, then, we can divide classroom events into three standard types, using our definition and knowledge of communication:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXPRESSION AND INTERPRETATION OF MEANING?</th>
<th>COMMUNICATIVE PURPOSE?</th>
<th>SUMMARY STATEMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exercise</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Not Communicative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Partially Communicative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Fully Communicative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

You may ask: If Exercises are not communicative, do they have a purpose in the communicative curriculum? Don't students need "to learn the basics" before they communicate? We can answer this by (1) reminding ourselves why instructors engage in these events, and (2) reminding ourselves about the nature of language and the nature of acquisition. The purpose of Exercises (for instructors who use them) is to practice language, presumably because practicing the vocabulary or practicing a grammar point is "how you learn it." Thus, instructors who use Exercises must believe that language acquisition happens in a particular way. But we know this not to be true. We know that acquisition happens as a complex, constrained process that involves input (defined in a particular way) and internal mechanisms (Universal Grammar and general learning architecture).

Exercises fail as events that promote or cause acquisition, because they do not account for the most basic sketch of acquisition we have constructed after almost five decades of research. In short, Exercises lack input and do not provide the kind of data the learning mechanisms need for creating language in the learner's mind/brain. At best, they waste time that could be used doing other things in the communicative classroom.

**WHILE WE'RE ON THE TOPIC...**

Some students like Exercises. In our third-semester Spanish classes, many students place in from high school. When they don't get work sheets and Exercises (staples of previous Spanish classes for many of them), some complain they are not learning. Like many teachers, principals, administrators and others, these students see language as other subject matter that, like math, history, chemistry and all others, you put a grade on and show "achievement" in. It's probably time we reconsider this notion.

What Kinds of Tasks Are There?

Let's examine two other Tasks and see what the difference is between them. They both deal with the same topic and are based on tasks that James F. Lee and I have used in other work (see Foundational Readings).
Version A: Sedentary, or active?

Step 1. Look over the following. Which activities did you do yesterday?
1. I read.
2. I worked at the computer.
3. I worked out/I exercised.
4. I rode my bike somewhere.
5. I walked somewhere.
6. I drove somewhere.
7. I watched TV.
8. I watched a movie.
9. I cleaned house/my room.
10. I cooked.

Step 2. Now interview someone in class, asking them if they did the activities listed in Step 1. Be sure to note that person's response!

MODEL: Did you work out yesterday?

Step 3. Now rate yourself and your partner on the following scale based on the information you obtained in Steps 1 and 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>very active</th>
<th>very sedentary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Step 4. Listen as your instructor leads a discussion on the results from Step 3. [The instructor asks students for their rankings and puts them on the board. The class calculates the group average. Just how active/sedentary is this group of students? How does the instructor fit in? The instructor shares his/her answers, and the class assigns a ranking.]

Version B: Sedentary, or active?

Step 1. List ten activities you did yesterday (e.g., I worked out. I read.)

Step 2. Now interview someone in class, asking them if they did the activities listed in Step 1. Be sure to note that person's response!

MODEL: Did you work out yesterday?

Step 4. Listen as your instructor leads a discussion on the results from Step 3. [The instructor asks students for their rankings and puts them on the board. The class calculates the group average. Just how active/sedentary is this group of students? How does the instructor fit in? The instructor shares his/her answers, and the class assigns a ranking.]

What's the difference between Versions A and B? Both are Tasks. They both involve the expression and interpretation of meaning. They both respect the context of the classroom (i.e., the Tasks respect who the participants are and what the physical setting of the classroom is). And they both have a cognitive-informational outcome, as students and instructor learn something about themselves and the world around them (i.e., their level of physical activity). And so you know, when I do this activity with students, in the end we look at data I've collected on age groups using this same Task. What we find out is that as you get older, your physical activity goes down. Then, somewhere in your late 60s, it goes up again.

The difference between the two is that Version A is an input-oriented Task while Version B is an output-oriented Task. In the input-oriented Task, learners do not create with language. All they need is in front of them. They check off sentences they read, they read questions aloud to each other, and they are asked only to respond to, or make use of, language that's in front of them. During Version A, learners are largely engaged in the interpretation side of communication. In short, they do not create meaning.

In Version B, however, learners must create meaning on their own. They must come up with sentences and questions to ask each other. They are engaged in both interpretation and expression of meaning as they complete the Task.

"Input-oriented Tasks allow for communication in the classroom when learners have limited expressive ability. Output-oriented Tasks allow for communication when learners have more expressive ability."
Why is it important to have two different categories of Tasks? The answer is simple. Input-oriented Tasks allow for communication in the classroom when learners have limited expressive ability with language. Output-oriented Tasks allow for communication when learners have more expressive ability with language. I often hear from instructors that they can't use Tasks in their beginning classes because their students "can't do anything with language yet." These teachers are unnecessarily viewing Tasks as output activities, forgetting that the interpretation of meaning is just as valid as expression of meaning in the communicative classroom.

Thus, teachers don't need to wait for learners to get more language to use Tasks in the classroom. They can use input-oriented Tasks from almost the beginning. And, of course, instructors can use any combination of input-oriented and output-oriented Tasks, depending on learners' familiarity with the topic, vocabulary, and other aspects of language.

So, for example, Version A might be good when learners are shaky with just learning past tense. Version B might be better when learners have more control over past tense in their output. The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines would deem Version A more appropriate for Novice-level or Intermediate-level learners and Version B better for Intermediate-High to Advanced. The point here is not to view Tasks as always output-oriented. Because communication involves expression and interpretation of meaning, instructors can fashion Tasks to focus on one or both sides of an interaction, depending on the student level.

Have you noticed something about the Tasks we've looked at so far? It is this: Tasks are structured. They have steps—a procedure—that guides students and lets them know when they have finished.

Let's contrast the Tasks we've seen with the one Activity we looked at. In the Activity, students are simply told to interview someone to find out what he/she did last night. As a student, how many things do I have to find out? One? Two? Five? How do I know when I've finished? When is the Activity completed? We could change the Activity to be something like, "Interview someone and find out five things that person did last night." Now I know when I'm done with the Activity. But with a Task, it is always clear to a student when he or she has finished because the Task specifies the information that must be obtained. There is always some concrete immediate informational goal.

In addition, in the Activity I'm not guided. How do I start? What language do I need? In a Task, the event is structured so I am helped and guided from beginning to end. I know how to start, proceed, and conclude. Activities don't require this kind of structure. Tasks always do.

So far we have looked at Tasks that have typical cognitive-informational outcomes; that is, those that taught us something about the world around us. But a cognitive-informational outcome might also include a project. These kinds of tasks are project-based Tasks. Here are examples of project-based Tasks that work in language classrooms:

- **Creating a pamphlet.** Students create a pamphlet for next-semester students who will take the course this semester. What useful information would be included in that pamphlet? What would it look like? Other pamphlets might welcome international students, or provide instructions on how to do something or tips on using social media.

- **Creating a Wikipedia page.** Students create a Wikipedia page on a movie the class has watched, a story the class has read (e.g., synopsis, protagonist, antagonist, major conflicts), or another shared experience.

- **Scripting and filming a documentary.** Students interview speakers of a second language (locally, via Skype, or by some other means) on a particular topic and then put together a very short film.

- **Creating a collage.** Students assemble a series of images that represent a theme (e.g., sexism, racism, equality, spirituality) or narrate a story or news item. The images can include captions/words. Students then display their collages and describe/explain the images.

- **Conducting a survey/experiment.** Students conduct a survey to find out what students think of language learning, another culture, or some other theme appropriate for the language they are learning. They can then gather data online, collect results, and present their findings to the class and/or publish them on a website.

- **Writing lyrics to music.** Students listen to a melody without lyrics and work together to create four or five stanzas to make public via a course management system or some other online platform.

In project-based Tasks, as in all Tasks, there is no intent to practice language per se or any particular feature of language. Instead, the final outcome is a project such as the examples above. Such projects involve a cognitive-informational purpose, because, as students work toward their goals, they learn things about the world around them in the way.

The particular project-based Tasks listed above would take some time, and would be best as long-term course goals. Would they be good for beginners? Probably not. They may be better for more advanced learners. Teachers might consider, then, how Tasks could progress across time from simpler Tasks to more complicated Tasks.
Outside of language classes, educational specialists have touted Project-Based Learning (PBL), in which students gain some kind of knowledge and/or skill while investigating a topic and responding to engaging or complex questions about it. Yet we don’t want to confuse PBL with the Tasks and projects-as-Tasks described here. Most PBL is beyond what students of language can do at the lower levels. Imported from educational contexts: PBL assumes ability with language. This is why it is a popular approach for learning science, history, and other subjects: speakers work in their first language to complete PBL projects, but beginning students don’t have skills in the second language equivalent to their first language skills. So PBL in languages might be better for more advanced language proficiency levels. Do a Google search and see what PBL looks like. Then you can determine if it would work for you at lower levels of language proficiency.

Working With Tasks

Most language textbooks, especially those for world languages, do not contain Tasks. How, then, can Tasks be integrated into the curriculum? There are two principal ways in which Tasks can form the backbone of a curriculum: (1) to drop them in at points that make sense thematically, or (2) to let them drive the curriculum. We will look at each option individually.

The first way to integrate Tasks into the curriculum is to examine the materials being used and ask, “Is there a Task that makes sense for this thematic unit?” Let’s consider “For Your Instructor”: When might we drop this Task into the curriculum? Perhaps after students have studied subject matter (e.g., names and terms for history, English, languages, humanities, science). In many world language textbooks this happens relatively early. By then, students have already been introduced to such things as saying their names and telling where they’re from. This Task, then, would fit in quite naturally. (We’ll address question “But what if they haven’t learned X yet?” in a moment.)

Regarding the Task “Sedentary or Active?” Version A, the input-oriented Task, could be dropped into the curriculum at just about any time once the students have begun to accumulate some basic vocabulary related to daily activities and routines. But it might be an excellent Task when students are first exposed to the past tense. Why? Because the Task’s input-oriented version does not require any production of the past tense in a creative manner. The Task is “self-contained” and doable by students who are just learning how to talk about the past. It would make an excellent Task for any thematic unit on daily routines—and not those that many world language textbooks concoct to teach reflexive and pronominal verbs (e.g., wake up, take a shower, shave, brush your teeth), but actual daily routines (e.g., get up, eat, work, go to class, work out, study, go to bed).

In short, Tasks can be dropped in at particular times during the curriculum to shore up the classroom’s communicative nature.

Tasks might even be used as measures of proficiency development. For example, ACTFL has advocated the use of can-do statements. These can be general statements (“I can talk about my daily life, including information about family and friends...”) or more specific ones (“I can talk about what I do on weekdays and my weekday schedule is different from my weekend schedule”). However, can-do statements may not be specific enough for us to know how successful a student is: what does it mean to “talk about my daily life” or to “talk about what I do on weekdays?” Can-do statements may be like the Activities we reviewed earlier: they may involve the expression and interpretation of meaning, but when is the Can-do Activity over?

When I say three things? Five things? Ten things?

In this case, we might consider the Task as an alternative to the can-do statement. If I can do “Sedentary or Active?” I am concretely demonstrating my ability to talk about my daily life. If I can do “For Your Instructor,” I am demonstrating another way to talk about daily life (e.g., classes, schedules, credits). So one way Tasks can help to form the backbone of the communicative curriculum is to assume the function of Can-do statements—almost like “mini-assessments” during the curriculum. If I can do the Task, I am demonstrating some facet of communicative ability and proficiency development.

In fact, Tasks can be used as alternatives to traditional testing for the communicative, proficiency-oriented classroom. For instance, students could record themselves performing the Task, using their smartphones, laptops, iPads, or other devices. Then they upload their recordings (with clearly identifiable information) into a predetermined site. The instructor then listens to each set of Tasks and, depending on the evaluation metric used, assigns a performance grade.

Tasks can also form the backbone of the curriculum by driving the content of the course. This means abandoning textbooks and traditional classroom approaches and forming units around Tasks. How does this work? For example, let’s say I want to make “For Your Instructor” the first unit of my Spanish curriculum. I analyze the Task and ask myself: What do students need to know and know how to do in order to complete this Task? Then I work backwards and build in activities and mini-tasks.
that work toward the main Task. This is often called **backward planning** or **backward design**: you think about the goal you have in mind (in this case, a particular Task) figure out how you will get there, and develop a map:

- Select the Task you want to be the "goal."
- Determine what students need to know and how to do in order to complete the Task.
- Develop activities and mini-tasks that work on what they need to know and know how to do so that they work toward the goal.

One caveat here involves the question of what students need to know and know how to do. Instructors make broad statements such as "they need to know numbers" or "they need to know the past tense." Such statements are usually not accurate. Let's look at "Sedentary or Active?" (Version A or B). Many instructors' gut reaction is: "Students need to know the past tense." But do they? A careful examination suggests that students need to know only first-person singular and second-person singular, the verb forms they work with on their own in Steps 1 and 2. For Step 4, the teacher will provide the scaffolding necessary to work with third-person verb forms, so students may not actually need to know these verb forms before starting the Task. And because language acquisition is slow and piecemeal, it is fine if students learn only particular verb forms for a Task. In this way, Tasks drive the unit and help us shake off traditional ideas about what to teach and when.

In all use of Tasks, whether as "drop-ins" or unit goals, instructors must examine the Task and determine the tools students need to complete it. If the instructor is satisfied that students have the tools, the Task is good to go. If not, the instructor must create a map of Activities and mini-Tasks to help students prepare for the Task. (In the Epilogue, we'll see one example of how this works.)

**WHILE WE'RE ON THE TOPIC...**

Try to imagine a textbook organized around Tasks instead of the traditional grammatical syllabus and vocabulary groups. How difficult is it for you to imagine such a thing? If it is difficult, why?

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**Implications for Language Teaching**

Many of the implications for language teaching involving the central role of Tasks have already emerged in our discussion. In this section we will focus on additional implications that may be less clear. The first is:

**Exercises and Activities are not the foundation of communicative or proficiency-oriented language teaching.**

If our goal is to develop communicative ability with language, and if Exercises don't focus on meaning, then they are not particularly useful. They are not useful for "learning grammar," either. Since Activities lack communicative purpose, it is not clear whether teachers and students treat them as communicative events as opposed to practice with vocabulary and grammar.

Our second implication is:

**Textbooks and commercial materials need to move away from Exercises and Activities as the staples of learning and make Tasks central to classroom activities.**

This implication is a call for instructors to ask publishers and materials providers to include Tasks as central elements of textbooks and other commercial products. Unless instructors do this, or the demands in the market change, publishers will continue to drive the nature of language teaching by putting non-communicative materials in the hands of teachers and students.

If we consider ideas we've touched on in other chapters, then another implication arising from this chapter is:

**Instructors need alternative means to assess students and perhaps even move away from "assigning grades" to students at the end of the semester.**

This is really an implication of all the principles and ideas covered in this book so far. In this chapter we examined one way Tasks can be used to assess performance. If we continue with this line of thought and move away from "language as other subject matter" (see Chapters 2 and 3), then performance-based approaches to student assessment are needed. There are already calls for such approaches in the profession, and numerous ACTFL publications advocate them. If Tasks are central to the curriculum, if they form its backbone, then we need alternatives to traditional testing and grading. This may be the ultimate challenge facing communicative language teaching in educational settings.

**Foundational Readings**


Discussion Questions and Food for Thought

1. Review the chapter and make a list of all bolded or italicized words (except non-English words), terms and concepts. Can you define each one or explain what it means? Can you give examples of your definitions?

2. Select a textbook for the language you teach or will be teaching, and examine one chapter/lesson in it. Using the characteristics of Exercises, Activities, and Tasks outlined in this chapter, can you identify the types of things the textbook asks students to do? What is the relative ratio of Exercises to Activities to Tasks for that lesson?

3. Select one of the Tasks in this chapter and adapt it for the language you teach or will teach. Then analyze what students need to know and know how to do to perform that Task. Finally, see if you can find a “natural spot” in a textbook for the language you are working with to drop it in (assuming that text does not already contain a Task in that spot).

4. Read Chapter 4 of Lee and Van Patten, in which they explain how to use Tasks as lesson goals. Then return to the Task you selected for Question 3 above. Can you do the backward planning and map out what will happen before the Task is begun?

5. Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) is an organization that promotes and researches the use of Tasks as “the central unit” of language teaching. See if you can find three to four examples of Tasks promoted by TBLT. In what ways are the tasks in TBLT similar to or different from those described in the present chapter?

6. Examine a university semester or secondary year-long curriculum. Focus on the lessons in its textbook. Develop five to six Tasks that can be used as performance assessments at key points during the semester or year.

7. Imagine using Tasks to assess students instead of traditional tests. Review the following rating guide for assessing students on the task, and discuss with someone else how you might apply the guide. If you can, ask several student volunteers to record the Task so you can listen to it later and apply the guide. What questions do you have about the rating guide? Are you worried about “grammar” and “accuracy”? What makes doing a Task successful? How does our definition of “communication” inform how we develop and make use of rubrics and guides for assessing Task performance?

Task Performance Rating Guide

2 points: The student can perform the Task with relative ease.

1 point: The student can perform the Task, but has occasional difficulty, or struggles at times during the Task.

0 points: The student could not perform the Task, or struggled so much as to demonstrate basic inability.

For each of the “I” statements below, indicate which applies to you:

1. I can state the difference between an Exercise, an Activity, and a Task.

2. I can identify a Task when I see one.

3. I understand the difference between an input-oriented Task and an output-oriented Task.

4. I can state the difference between Tasks as drop-ins and Tasks as the goals of units.

5. I understand what it means to determine what students need to know and what they need to be able to do in order to be successful with a task.