Chapter 11
Pedagogic Consequences: A Task-Based Approach to Distance Second Language Learning

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INTRODUCTION

As seen in chapter 4, CLT proponents assumed that the best way to approach learning a second language was to provide the learners with a great quantity of authentic input and with opportunities to discuss and process the second language.

It gradually became clear that it is not possible to specify what a learner will learn in linguistic terms and that compatibility with the cognitive processes involved in L2 acquisition had to be ensured. Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) was one of the responses (see chapter 3). Prabhu (1987) suggested that content could be specified by holistic units of communication, i.e. tasks, and by pre-selection of linguistic items. This did not seem sufficient, as was seen in chapter 5, Long & Crookes (1991) emphasized the need for learners to attend to form consciously.

Issues of cognitive demand placed on the learner by the complexity of tasks have raised the question of how to reduce the cognitive load the learner has to cope with. This involves linguistic difficulty, but also problems related to cultural schemata and task familiarity. This cognitive demand may make it difficult for the learner to deploy cognitive resources to notice inter- and intra-lingual gaps.

Task-based learning is an example of Gagné’s higher order learning (1985) which depends on the automatization of lower order skills.

The task-based learning tradition has moved from an emphasis on negotiation of meaning to an investigation of a number of issues related to Form-Focused Instruction, shifting thus to a more cognitive stance. The actional approach, also linked with CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001), and the sociocultural approach which is influential in distance language learning settings (Lamy & Hampel, 2007), do not advocate cognitive reflection to the same extent.

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OBJECTIVES OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter is dedicated to how language learning and teaching research can actually be applied to distance L2 courses. Its objective is to enable the reader to organize and run courses along the theoretical lines defined in the previous chapters. Initially, some pages will be devoted to defining what tasks are, why they have attracted our attention and how they have been dealt with by researchers and practitioners. Details of the two major approaches and of the approach we suggest for distance learning will follow. Because of the demands of blended or distance contexts, we have been led to propose macro and micro tasks in a dual learning cycle which shares many of the common features of the other task-based approaches, and this will be presented at length (online course models, guiding principles, movement from the curriculum to the syllabus and course design, thematic and linguistic content). We will show how the learner can become the course designer and how sequencing tasks can be handled.

A practical classification of tasks will be described: in terms of design and characteristics, including feedback and monitoring. This will lead to a taxonomy of tasks (micro and macro tasks, specific tasks, CMCL settings).

Assessment, including formative vs. summative evaluation, certification and assessing the course, will conclude the chapter.

This chapter will not cover the engineering aspects of course implementation as they were the subject of chapter 10. It will not deal with the purely technological side of tasks either. References to both these subjects will only be made when specific theoretical demands of second language learning justify them.

As suggested in previous chapters, readers can initially try and find how they would anticipate the content of the chapter, and compare with what they will find. A synthetic table, at the end of the chapter will make this comparison easier. Personal or interactive discussion of the differences will prove useful for personal appropriation of the content of the chapter.

TASKS FOR DISTANCE LANGUAGE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Definitions

Task-based learning (TBL) is based entirely on meaningful tasks and follows procedural syllabi: sets of tasks based on real-life situations (Nunan, 1989). It focuses on the use of authentic language. Assessment is primarily based on task outcome, defined as the appropriate completion of tasks, and not on accuracy of language forms (see the levels of proficiency of CEFR in chapter 3, and Council of Europe, 2001).

As a consequence, a task:

- involves real world meaningful processes of language use;
- can involve any or all of the four language skills;
- has a clearly defined socially realistic outcome;
- triggers cognitive processes;
- involves the learner personally (individual outcome).

Tasks have a clear sociocultural dimension (Ellis, 2003), which should not be overlooked.

Advantages of Implementing TBL

The advantages have been listed in chapter 4. Linguistic syllabi are not effective in promoting acquisition because they do not conform to acquisitional processes, whereas TBL corresponds to our understanding of what language is (see chapter 3). There is still little empirical evidence to demonstrate that TBL courses are more efficient than linguistic syllabi, which implies that reflective practice should measure their validity.