

Reviews

Doing Task-Based Teaching

D. Willis and J. Willis

Oxford University Press 2007, 294 pp., £18

ISBN 978 0 19 442210 9

Tasks in Second Language Learning

V. Samuda and M. Bygate

Palgrave Macmillan 2007, 312 pp., £19.99

ISBN 814 0391 1872

What are we to make of task-based learning and task-based teaching (TBL/TBT)? Its advocates promote its efficacy with fervour, but not everyone shares their enthusiasm for, as Samuda and Bygate point out, 'Tasks have been an element in second language teaching and research for over 30 years, and yet their use continues to invite controversy' (p. 1). Perhaps this has something to do with the fact that despite some of the dramatic claims for the superiority of TBL over more traditional form-focused teaching, there is little classroom-based research evidence to prove or disprove such claims. Will the two books under review help to resolve the controversy in any way and, speaking personally, will they help this reviewer to arrive at a more informed evaluation of TBL's efficacy?

Before trying to answer these two questions, it is worth describing what these two books contain and what, if anything should command a reader's attention.

The first thing to say about the books under review is that they are very different animals. Whereas Willis and Willis devote slightly less than two-and-a-half pages to the topic of 'second language acquisition research and TBT', Samuda and Bygate devote more than two thirds of their book to opinion and research into tasks, and only some 35 pages to the way in which tasks have been (and are being) implemented in a pedagogic context. Willis and Willis, on the other hand—and as the title of their book suggests—focus on tasks and task-based teaching in the classroom

and, as such, aim to offer teachers insights and procedures to help them become fully fledged TBL practitioners.

The great strength of *Doing Task-Based Teaching* is the inclusion of many examples of tasks and task sequences from a large group of teachers around the world. For example, in Canada, Sandee Thompson tweaks a 'directions' task with her lower intermediate students; at Yale University, Alicia van Altena gets her students on a 'Spanish in the media' course to design a radio programme based on two views of Fidel's Cuba and, in Japan, Jason Moser runs an activity sequence talking about animals and pets and relishes the advantages of task repetition.

Doing Task-Based Teaching is divided into ten chapters which address themes such as the basis of task-based approaches, task-based sequences in the classroom, listing, sorting, classifying, matching, problem solving, projects, and storytelling. There are chapters on language focus and form focus, on the task-based classroom and the real world, on adapting and refining tasks, designing a task-based syllabus, and on how to integrate TBT with coursebooks and other frequently asked questions. Along the way, in a chapter called 'Tasks based on written and spoken texts', there is a fabulous array of reading activities, including prediction and language-based tasks, sometimes focused on meaning and sometimes focused on form. Although the chapter is less generous in its attention to spoken text, the detailed descriptions of reading sequences are exemplary, and I would urge you to look at them.

I feel similarly positive about the listing, sorting, classifying (and many other) activities on offer here. I would want any teacher to have access to knowledge about them. Helpfully, the authors offer mind maps showing the different options (activities) available for the treatment of a topic. There is an excellent discussion of task parameters (i.e. things you have to decide when designing a task) and a convincing (but short) defence of tasks in mixed ability groups. In other words, this book is packed with good activities and useful advice.

The great strength of *Tasks in Second Language Learning* is that not only are modern tasks set in their historical context but also that Samuda and Bygate take us on an extended tour of research undertaken so far, before pointing us to possible research in the future. Along the way, they take time out to look at some applications of TBL in pedagogic contexts. Thus, in the seven chapters that make up 'Part 1: Background', we learn about the work of Dewey (the great-grandfather of holistic and experiential learning) and Kirkpatrick on projects (in the second decade of the twentieth century). Bruner discusses learning transfer in the 1960s, and in the 1970s, Freinet writes about purposeful learning while Freire suggests a four-phase process of participatory curriculum development. When, in Chapter 4, Samuda and Bygate discuss tasks in second language pedagogy, they reference the work of Swales and Van Lier in the 1990s and Leun in 2001. In Chapter 5, they call on Candlin, Long, Prabhu, Skehan, Ellis, Bereiter, and Scardamalia to help them define a pedagogic task (an issue we will return to later). In Chapter 8, the authors look in detail at eight pieces of research into pedagogic tasks, and in Chapter 9, they discuss how task-based learning has been used and incorporated into second language teaching and learning by looking especially (but not only) at the widely quoted Bangalore project, Long and Crookes' 'no language seeding' proposals, and at Jane Willis' 1996 *A Framework for Task-Based Learning*. *Tasks in Second Language Learning* ends with a wonderfully useful list of suggestions for future research and a list of resources for anyone interested in pursuing tasks further. Throughout the book, the authors are keen to pin down research issues and problems and to suggest ways out of them because one of their aims is to explore why tasks are controversial and 'to consider what people do to make tasks educative or uneducative, why this can happen, and what the alternatives might be' (p. 1).

And so back to my original question, which is essentially about whether TBL works and why I, or any other teacher, should be involved in it. In my opinion, an awful lot hangs on what a task actually is. Willis and Willis are less than helpful here. True they offer 'criteria' for tasks, but 'these criteria will not provide us with a watertight definition of what constitutes a task . . .' (p. 13). Instead they quote, admiringly, Skehan's suggestion that 'some of the time it may be difficult to decide whether an activity merits the label "task" since the two underlying characteristics, avoidance of specific structures and engagement with worthwhile meaning, are matters of degree, rather than being categorical'. As I read this, I found myself thinking that in a book which is written for

'teachers who want to get a better understanding of how task-based teaching works in practice' (p. xiii) and which is devoted to the superiority of such practices, a lack of willingness to pin down exactly what is on offer is less than totally persuasive. As far as I can see a task in the world of Willis and Willis is a kind of more or less communicative activity with more or less of a focus on language. I have absolutely no objection to communicative activities of course (how could I?), but if I cannot be sure whether or not they are *tasks*—the central building blocks, after all, of this whole way of looking at teaching and learning—it makes it quite difficult to evaluate what is going on.

Samuda and Bygate, however, do not duck the definition issue in the same way. After considerable discussion of how people have tried to define tasks, they come up with their own reasoned version which is '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' (p. 69). This sounds better, though you may still feel, as I do, that it leaves the whole issue of exactly where attention to language form fits in somewhat open.

A marked feature of Willis and Willis is to suggest that task-based teaching, if I understand this correctly, is any kind of teaching which involves tasks. This allows them to categorize lessons and programmes which have some kind of task-based activity in a longer procedure as 'task based'. For example, they describe how one of their teacher informants 'coordinated the introduction of TBL into his program' (p. 182). This sounds great, especially the contention that when teachers are all doing the same thing they have a lot they can share and talk about. It sounds like a terrific piece of work. But (and I think this is really important in a discussion of TBL) 'lesson planning meant figuring out how to use the task and then build a sequence around it' (p. 182). What worries me here is an elision between what Samuda and Bygate characterize as *task-based* learning and teaching as opposed to *task-supported* learning and teaching. If TBL is, in reality, task-supported learning, we can say that any lesson that has a task in it (even if it has, for example, a healthy chunk of PPP preceding it) is task based. But this is, of course, an entirely different proposition from the work of, say, Long and Crookes (quoted in *Tasks in Second Language Learning*) who, after conducting a needs analysis, designed tasks in a syllabus where elements of linguistic form were not specified, where tasks were not seeded with language for students to notice, and where attention to

language form was opportunistic rather than part of task design.

Of course, this fault-line runs through all discussions of task-based teaching. Whereas the work of people like Nunan (2004) seems to suggest that it is okay to teach language first and then use it to perform a task later, other versions suggest the opposite: task first, language later. That is what I thought Jane Willis was advocating in her framework book (Willis 1996). Now I am not so sure.

In *Doing Task-Based Teaching*, the authors are keen to stress that 'form should be subordinated to meaning and, for this reason, should come after, rather than before a task' (p. 18). They base this on a passionately argued section in which they say that if students learn a form and then try and use it meaningfully they will fail because 'it is very difficult to concentrate on what we are going to say and at the same time on *how* we are going to say it' (p. 17). After all, they point out, it takes language a long time to develop and the first treatment will not lead to mastery (nor will correction by the way, which inexplicably gets less than a page in this book because it is not 'nearly as effective as we would like to think' [p. 122]). This development process is presumably why so much practice and review—and activities such as role-play, projects, etc.—are built into modern lesson sequences. And these are exactly the kind of activities which are so abundantly provided in their book. But remember that they insist that form focus comes after, not before a task. How then, do we categorize a stage where 'there is likely to be a focus on language, especially on lexis—words and phrases—at the beginning when the teacher is priming or setting up the task sequence' (p. 113)? Indeed, many of the activities on show here have language study at all sorts of different stages (both pre-, inter-, and post-task in my judgement), and while this seems completely unexceptionable, it does not appear to justify the claim that something essentially *different* is going on.

Of course, this quandary is not new. In their summary of the Bangalore project, Samuda and Bygate focus on the intense discussion it generated about whether the teacher-led pre-task stage was a form of covert teaching or not—and further whether the success of the project was more the result of teacher and student enthusiasm rather than for any real pedagogic reason. Furthermore, why is it necessarily better for language to be met in a meaning-focused task rather than overtly in pre-task form-focused activities? If language takes time to develop, perhaps, it will take that time however it is first encountered. Moreover trying to get the form and the meaning right at the same time is just as

problematic whichever way you come to it, I would have thought!

And so my reaction to reading these two books is a hugely reinforced ambivalence about TBL and a great excitement about the directions in which future research might help me to understand it. Samuda and Bygate have laid the ground out here with admirable clarity and engagement and provoked a host of (good) questions about what happens when people engage in experiential tasks. Willis and Willis, on the other hand, have made it less easy for me to sign up as a fully fledged disciple of task-based learning and teaching, even though they have offered me a range of interesting and enjoyable activities. Despite reading these two titles then, I still find myself in sympathy with Littlewood's (2004) suggestion that 'the main common denominator of communicative and task-based approaches in their various forms is that, even when they use form-focused procedures, they are always *oriented* towards communication' (pp. 325–6). Er, well yes! And anyway, there is one big elephant clomping around in this particular room, namely whether an approach to language learning which depends on tasks is appropriate for all kinds of learners. Bygate and Samuda discuss learner difference in the strategies they adopt for performing tasks, and that is an area well worth researching, but neither they nor Willis and Willis are able to address the issue of whether TBL always wins out over more traditional form-focused teaching, and whether it does this for all students, even those who need the comfort of analysis or who want to depend on their 'considerable intellects' (Pinker 1994: 29). Perhaps, then, Ur (2006) is right when she suggests that in, say, a state school with only three or four lessons a week, communicative tasks (sic) are a 'necessary *added* (my italics) component of a structured, language-based syllabus and methodology' (p. 3). For I do know, after all, that language teaching which does not give students a chance to use language in meaning-focused activities is not the kind of language teaching I want to be involved in, and in that I am confident that all four authors would agree with me. But in the meantime, my ambivalence remains because, as Samuda and Bygate point out, '... until classroom-based studies become a mainstream for research in this field, the pedagogical use of learning tasks will never be properly researched ...' (p. 191) or, we might add, properly evaluated.

References

Littlewood, W. 2004. 'The task-based approach: some questions and suggestions'. *ELT Journal* 58/4: 319–26.

- Nunan, D.** 2004. *Task-Based Learning and Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pinker, S.** 1994. *The Language Instinct: The New Science of Language and Mind*. London: Penguin.
- Ur, P.** 2006. 'A different ball game: contrasting contexts and methodologies'. Unpublished article based on a talk given at the IATEFL Conference in Harrogate, April 2006.
- Willis, J.** 1996. *A Framework for Task-Based Learning*. Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd.

The reviewer

Jeremy Harmer teaches on the MA/TESOL at the New School, New York, and is the author (and co-author) of various books on methodology and classroom materials. These include *The Practice of English Language Teaching*, *How to Teach English*, and *How to Teach Writing* (Pearson Education Ltd) and *Just Right* (Marshall Cavendish ELT). He is the general editor of the *How To* series.

Email: jeremy.harmer@btinternet.com

*doi:*10.1093/elt/ccp007