

## DESIGNING TASKS TO PROMOTE INTERACTION

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*Four tasks, set up by an English teacher in his EFL lessons with undergraduate Licenciatura students, were analyzed and compared on the basis of the input involved while they were being developed. The nature of input was established for each case through observing particular features of each task as well as factors that might affect input in those. At the end, it was seen how tasks play an essential role in the way participants make an effort to understand and be understood in their interactions.*

### **The procedure for the innovation**

Four samples of tasks were collected at different sections from an EFL classroom. Each of them, quite different from each other in nature, were designed to be developed by students in second semester of a Licenciatura in Languages (see annex 1). A nested group composed of four students, whose ages were between eighteen and twenty four years, was observed while they developed the tasks interacting with their classmates and the teacher. The whole group was asked about specific candidates to be in the nested group and these four young adults volunteered. Personality, proficiency and experiences were quite different among them.

In order to monitor this process, the lessons were video recorded three times.

Audio recording was also used, as well as direct observation by two teachers who were part of the team in this study. This process helped a lot to complement the analysis. Finally, supporting materials, which were used to carry out the different tasks, were also collected.

### **Theoretical framework**

Task-based learning has been an approach adopted in many different ways in language classrooms. In our experience for instance, most of us got acquainted with it through the implementation of classroom projects to organize learning experiences. This has shown to be a beneficial methodology.

Students who develop tasks in language classrooms get engaged in a great deal of interaction. These exchanges generate input which might change depending on the kind of tasks we choose for our classrooms.

### **Defining tasks**

It is common to find that many prospect and active teachers tend to identify different actions as tasks. For example, some of them refer to tasks as completing exercises from textbooks, others relate the concept of task to any activity developed in class, and other

educators define it as a problem solving action. Willis (1996: 23) proposes a general notion of tasks, which can give the previous beliefs a more concrete perspective in the line of the present paper, when he states that they are “activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome”. Some other relevant aspects which can complement the previous concept of task and can be used to guide an analysis and construction of such experiences have been set by Nunan (1991: 10-11) as follows: activities, teachers and learners’ roles, setting and input, which can be verbal or nonverbal.

Based on a diverse number of teaching and learning aspects, tasks have been classified by different authors, among them Prabhu, Pattison, Clark, Willis as information gap, reasoning gap, opinion gap, problem-solving, and those whose purpose is to share personal experiences.

**Defining input**

The issue of input and its nature has been a broad and controversial one in the area of language acquisition. Authors such as Krashen, Ellis and Allright can be reviewed about the different positions in this matter. In this study, input refers to verbal or nonverbal communication that learners use in interactions to maintain fluidity.

The input produced in educational settings, as well as in others, is characterized by a series of modifications. Through the following devices, it is possible to facilitate communication and teaching. Among these, researchers like Ellis, T-sui and Seedhouse have identified: grammatical, ungrammatical and interactional modifications, which will be

exemplified by means of samples taken from data we collected by the authors of this article (see annex 2 for symbols and meanings that might appear in the samples).

To start with, we can have a look at an evidence of grammatical modification:

Luis: Do you have coffee with milk?  
 Teacher: Coffee and milk  
 L: Coffee and milk  
*(Sample from Task 1)*

Here we can see that the teacher provides input containing linguistic features that the learners have not learned yet. He is trying to help Luis be aware of a problem in the language he is using.

To continue with the analysis of modified input during the development of learning tasks, an example of ungrammatical modification is provided below. In a sample taken from task 2, Pedro is telling the class how he felt when his grandma died:

Pedro: We spend o eh a good time together but I feel me o I feel me  
 Teacher: I feel me?  
 P: No o I feel  
 T: I felt I felt myself?  
 P: Okay I felt myself eh...

The teacher introduces ungrammatical forms because he wants to accommodate what he is saying to Pedro’s talk, so they understand each other.

Finally, the following is an illustration of interactional modifications, taken from task 3:

T: If I ask you if you are going on o vacation...how do you keep in touch?

Mario: [Makes faces and signals to indicate that he doesn't understand]

T: xxx Do you **understand**?

M: Ah, I don't know. Aweek, for a week...

T: No o No. First was the time because you are talking about how long... But the means, how do you keep in touch.

M: Ah! By phone.

Here the teacher is trying to repair communication by repeating his question and adding some other hints to make it comprehensible for Mario.

### Input and tasks

The relation between input and tasks needs to be seen in two ways. The following sample, in which students have adapted a dialogue from a book to be performed in the class, can show this point clearly:

L: Can I have a **Capuccino**?

SB: No o I am afraid xxx

SB: Yeah o and anything else?

L: Yes, o I want a ooo How do you say PANECILLO?

L: Panecillo? o biscuit....biscuit and I want a cold xxx

(Sample from Task 1)

First of all, as it can be seen, the task is a potential generator of input for the learning situation. The student, Luis, used an expression they had just learnt from a model of conversation in a listening comprehension activity minutes before. Second, the input is mediated by students' background and knowledge, for example in the previous task, Luis will not only use input from the printed dialogue. Instead, he also used his knowledge about the given situation bringing vocabulary such as "panecillo" into it.

### Findings

Input can be shaped through specific characteristics of the task such as: goals, roles, communicative nature, type of interaction required, the materials needed for the task, students' preparation, the freedom the task allows, level of difficulty, the structure of the task, and the length. For example, task two has certain features which directly relate to the kind of input it generates. One of them is that students talk about different topics to their partners. It is seen how the narrators input is full of discourse management modifications. This is the case in the following sample. Student Pedro changes his topic and he and his audience need some orientation through the narrative. Let us see how modifications in his input play an essential role:

P: Eh o I don't know. I o remember this day very special and well

P: Eh oo and now I am going to talk about the most important person

Pedro is controlling the topics in his narrative using some markers to express the end of a topic and the starting of a new one.

Different tasks can make that not only the teacher (the one who is supposed to be the language model here) makes an effort in making input comprehensible to achieve communication through different modifications. Students also might be moved to work hard in modifying or reinforcing their input to make it comprehensible as can be seen in the following interaction which took place between two students, in task 2:

T: Okay questions

J: How did you meet your girlfriend?

P: when?

J: How did you meet your girlfriend?

P: Eh, I meet her in a party en o five years ago.

In this case, it is the student himself who repeats his question for Pedro. This is a role which traditionally is assumed by the teacher.

Tasks promote the use of different linguistic and paralinguistic means to shape and improve the quality of input. The previous idea is exemplified through the next piece of conversation taken from task 4 in which students are discussing about becoming a father as an “accidental situation”:

Juan: if you're not sure that the baby is yours...

Pedro: Right...why you are not sure? Maybe is yours o you were drunk?

Luis: Well.

T: That's an interesting **question!**

Here it can be seen that communication is unpredictable and students use their improvisation skills. This generates opportunities for students to develop strategies in making input meaningful. Pedro's desire to communicate his idea leads him to give a couple of answers to his own questions and this can clarify his contribution to the talk.

In some other cases, certain tasks require the students' background, which is reflected in the type of input they produce. That is why they bring cultural and social issues to the class, as in the next interaction taken from the same task mentioned above:

Mario: If you want to know which is the real father of the baby eh you have to do an analysis of ADN and hope for advice. And remember your career your future is xxx important.

In this particular case, Mario is talking about his own beliefs, feelings and in general, experience in life. This motivation causes that his input, though a bit out of standard parameters for the language, helps him communicate. Finally, he can express his advice in a highly controversial social issue.

### **Pedagogical implications**

- Careful preparation of specific features in tasks can result in providing students with quality input and so, help students improve in problematic areas of his language learning.

- The kind of tasks teachers decide to have in the classroom plays an essential part in the opportunities students might find to work hard in modifying theirs and others' input to make it comprehensible.

- Learners should be challenged through tasks which require them to use their life knowledge. So, the kind of input they produce might ensure several possibilities to connect social and cultural issues which keep their interest in learning how to communicate in the foreign language.

- Designing or choosing tasks needs to be a process in which teachers set the necessary conditions to promote in students the use of different linguistic and paralinguistic means. These tools can improve the quality of input.

### **References**

Nunan, D. (1991). *Designing Tasks for the Communicative Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Willis, J. (1996). *A Framework for Task-based Learning*. London: Longman.

*Annex 1: Description of tasks*

<i>Aspects</i>	<i>Task 1</i>	<i>Task 2</i>	<i>Task 3</i>	<i>Task 4</i>
Goal	Rehearse how to buy something in a shop.	Practice narrative tenses	Practice the use of expressions related to future plans	Give a piece of advice to someone
Learners' roles	Supposed customer and assistant	Narrator	Participant	Advisor, person in trouble or part of the public
Teacher's role	Observer and guide	Listener and guide	Guide and model	Part of public
Activities	Create a dialogue based on a model and role play it.	Narrate happy or sad events in one's life and answer questions about it	Complete sentences from the textbook	Integrate a group of advisors, discuss a problem and give some advice to solve it
Initial input	Model provided in the textbook, students' background knowledge and teacher's instructions	Students' preparation	Language in the textbook and students' background knowledge	Students' background knowledge and letters telling problems

*Annex 2: Transcript (Symbols and meanings used in the samples)*

XXX:	Inaudible
T:	For teacher
C:	For class
SG:	Girl student
SB:	Boy student
L:	Luis
P:	Pedro
J:	Juan
M:	Mario
[ ]	To explain what is going on with the class
<b>Word:</b>	For rising of intonation
Word:	For soft intonation
WORD:	For Spanish utterances