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What is This?

Designing a Task-Based Syllabus

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Abstract

This article presents a framework for designing a task-based course based on a distinction between unfocused and focused tasks. Various criteria for sequencing tasks in terms of complexity are identified and discussed. These criteria relate to task input, to task conditions, to the process of performing a task and to task outcomes. While it is recognized that the criteria cannot be applied to task sequencing algorithmically, it is argued that they should inform intuitive decisions about the design of task-based syllabuses. The article also considers two approaches to incorporating a focus on form into a task-based syllabus. In an integrated approach, content-obligatory and content-compatible language forms are identified for each task. In a modular approach, the syllabus is conceived of as two separate modules, one consisting of unfocused tasks and the other utilizing a traditional structural syllabus taught through a focus-on-forms approach and/or through focused tasks.

Introduction

A task is a workplan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of content (rather than language). To this end, it requires learners to give primary attention to meaning and to make use of their own linguistic resources, although, as we will see, the design of the task may predispose them to choose particular forms. A task is intended to result in language use that bears a resemblance, direct or indirect, to the way language is used in the real world. Like other language activities, a task can engage productive or receptive and oral or written skills.

Tasks can be unfocused or focused. In the case of unfocused tasks, no attempt is made to design the task to 'trap' learners into using a specific linguistic feature. In contrast, focused tasks aim to induce learners to process, receptively or productively, a predetermined linguistic feature (e.g. a grammatical structure)—see Loschky and Bley-Vroman (1993). Of course this processing must occur as a result of performing activities that satisfy the definition of a task above. Therefore, the targeted feature cannot be specified in the rubric of the task as this would likely result in learners giving primacy to form rather than meaning. Focused tasks, then, have two aims; one is to stimulate communicative language use as with unfocused tasks, the other is to target the use of a particular, predetermined target feature in meaning-centred communication.

Tasks have been used in two rather different ways in language pedagogy. In *task-supported language teaching* focused tasks have been incorporated into traditional language-based approaches to teaching. For example, 'PPP' (present–practice–produce) makes use of focused tasks in the final stage of a sequence of learning activities that begins with the presentation of a pre-selected linguistic form followed by controlled practice. Here learners are made aware of the linguistic focus and the task serves to provide opportunities for learners to use the pre-selected language item in free production. In such an approach, then, focused tasks serve as a methodological device for implementing a *structural syllabus*. In *task-based language teaching*, however, tasks, whether of the unfocused or focused kind, are treated as units of teaching in their own right and serve as the basis for designing complete courses. In this case, a task is the actual means for constructing the syllabus. This approach, then, requires a *task-based syllabus*. Such a syllabus can be entirely unfocused (as in Prabhu's [1987] Communicational Teaching Project) or it can be focused (i.e. informed by a list of structural items). In both cases, however, the syllabus consists of a list of tasks. This article is concerned with the design of task-based syllabuses for task-based teaching.

A Framework for Task-Based Course Design

Figure 1 identifies the key elements in the construction of a task-based course. The construction of a task-based syllabus requires first a specification of the *tasks* to be included in the syllabus. This involves *selection* and *sequencing*. In order to make a principled selection of tasks it is necessary to decide what types of task to use and to decide on their thematic content.

In specific purpose courses this can be guided by an analysis of the target tasks that particular groups of learners will be required to master (see Long 1985). In general courses, the choice of task types and thematic content will need to be guided by other considerations (e.g. the extent to which particular task types are likely to lead to the kinds of communication likely to promote successful L2 acquisition). To sequence tasks, appropriate criteria for grading their level of difficulty for the learner have to be identified. This will suffice in the preparation of a task-based syllabus consisting entirely of linguistically unfocused tasks. However, an optional element in the framework is a specification of the features of *language* (i.e. the *forms* and *functions* of language) to be incorporated into the design of the syllabus. If this option is chosen the result is a syllabus consisting either entirely of linguistically focused tasks or a mixture of focused and unfocused tasks. Such a syllabus introduces a focus on form into a meaning-centred curriculum; that is, the syllabus consists of 'tasks' as defined above but also allows also for the systematic treatment of linguistic form. In such a case, consideration needs to be given to both the sequencing of the tasks themselves and the sequencing of their linguistic content. Finally, Figure 1 shows that the syllabus serves as a basis for the preparation of teaching materials in the form of task workplans.

This article will consider two aspects of this framework: (1) the sequencing of tasks and (2) how to incorporate a focus on form into a task-based syllabus. Readers are referred to Ellis (2003) for a full account of the design process.
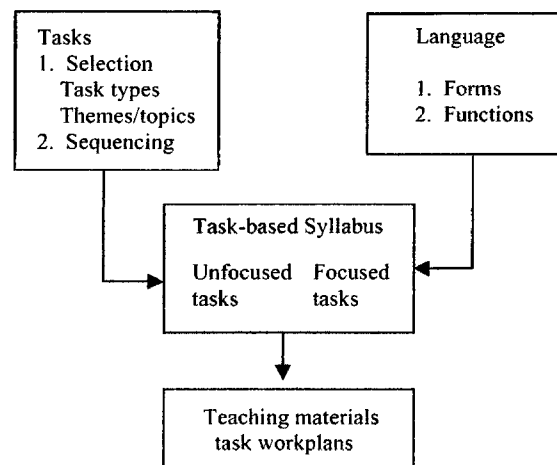

Figure 1. *Designing a task-based course*

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Sequencing Tasks

The design of a task-based syllabus requires that the tasks be sequenced so as to facilitate maximum learning. In effect, this requires determining the complexity of individual tasks so that the tasks can be matched to the learners' level of development and so that each task can scaffold the task that follows.

The ease with which learners are able to perform different tasks depends on three sets of factors. First, there are the inherent characteristics of the task itself. These relate to the nature of the input, the task conditions, the processing operations involved in completing the task and the outcome that is required. Robinson refers to these factors under the heading of 'task complexity'. He comments:

> Task complexity is the result of the attentional memory, reasoning, and other information processing demands imposed by the structure of the task on the language learner. These differences in information processing demands, resulting from design characteristics, are relatively fixed and invariant (2001: 29).

Task complexity can account for intra-learner variability (i.e. the variability evident when the same learner performs different tasks). Second, Robinson identifies factors relating to learners as individuals, which can influence how easy or difficult a particular task is for different participants. These factors include, obviously, the learner's level of proficiency and also various factors such as the learner's intelligence, language aptitude, learning style, memory capacity and motivation. Robinson sees these factors as relating to 'task difficulty', which is dependent on 'the resources the learner brings to the task' (2001: 31). Task difficulty accounts for inter-learner variability. The third set of factors involves the methodological procedures used to teach a task. These 'task procedures' can increase or ease the processing burden placed on the learner. They include the use of a pre-task activity (e.g. pre-teaching the vocabulary needed to perform the task or carrying out a task similar to the main task with the assistance of the teacher) and providing planning time (i.e. giving students the opportunity to plan before they undertake the task). Like task complexity factors, task procedures result in intra-learner variability. Here, however, we will be concerned solely with the factors that influence task complexity.

A number of criteria for grading tasks have been proposed (see Candlin 1987; Nunan 1989; Brindley 1989; Skehan 1998b and Robinson 2001 for reviews). I will not examine these different proposals in detail but instead

attempt a synthesis by identifying the various criteria that account for task complexity in terms of (1) input, (2) conditions, (3) processes and (4) outcomes. The various factors will be presented taxonomically as currently little is known about how they interrelate to determine complexity.

Factors Relating to Input

Tasks frequently supply learners with information and this can vary in complexity in several ways. We will consider the following factors: (1) medium, (2) code complexity, (3) cognitive complexity, (4) context dependency and (5) familiarity of information.

Input medium. With regard to input medium, information that is presented in written or pictorial form, which can be decoded in the learner's own time, is likely to be easier to process than information that is provided orally, which requires online decoding. However, the validity of this claim will depend on the learners' level of literacy in the L2. Prabhu (1987) notes that the students in the Communicational Teaching Project (beginner learners in Indian secondary schools) found tasks with an oral input easier than tasks presented in writing. It can also be surmised that pictorial input will be easier than verbal input as it makes no demands on the learner's linguistic resources. An exception, of course, would be pictorial input that was culturally marked so as to be unfamiliar to the learners. Tasks involving pictures and diagrams frequently figure in courses designed for learners of limited proficiency (e.g. Prabhu 1987).

Code complexity. The code complexity of the input (i.e. its lexical and syntactical complexity) is also likely to influence the learner's ability to comprehend the input and, therefore, the ease with which the task is performed. Texts with high-frequency vocabulary and a low level of subordination are easier to understand than texts with low-frequency vocabulary and complex sentence structure. Studies of the effects of linguistic modifications on the comprehension of texts lend support to this claim (see Chaudron 1988 for a review). However, as Candlin (1987: 20) states: 'there is no absolute reason whereby a complexifying of the code inevitably involves a corresponding increase in the interpretative density of the text'. It should also be noted that there is growing evidence that elaborative input (i.e. input that employs devices such as paraphrases and glosses rather than simplification) is more comprehensible than simplified input (Oh 2001).

Cognitive complexity. As, if not more, important is cognitive complexity. This concerns the cognitive demands of processing the content of the input material. Brown *et al*. (1984) suggest that it involves two dimensions. First, there is the information type. This can be 'static' (i.e. the information remains the same throughout the performance of the task), 'dynamic' (i.e. the information contains changing events and activities as in a video story) or 'abstract' (i.e. tasks that present information that has to be used to form an opinion or justify a position). Brown *et al*. claim that static tasks are easiest and abstract tasks the most difficult, with dynamic tasks intermediate. Prabhu (1987) also notes that tasks that require learners to work with abstract concepts proved more difficult than tasks involving the names of objects and actions.

The second dimension of cognitive complexity referred to by Brown *et al*. concerns the amount of information to be processed—the number of different elements or relationships involved. For example, a static task involving describing a diagram is easier when the input contains few elements of a similar size presented in a regular array than when it involves many elements of varying sizes in an uneven display. Similarly, in a dynamic task, a storyline that contains few characters and objects is easier to tell than one that contains many.

Skehan (2001) suggests that another factor that can potentially affect the cognitive complexity of the input is the degree of structure. This concerns whether the information has a clear macrostructure, as in a story where the time sequence is readily identifiable. Tasks where the input is clearly structured may be easier to perform than those where it is more loosely structured because learners can call on ready-made schemata to help them organize their productions.

Context dependency. The context dependency of the input may have an impact on complexity. Textual input that is supported by visual information in some form is generally easier to process than information with no such support. Robinson (1995) bases his claim that context-free input is more complex on L1 and L2 studies that show 'there-and-then' reference to be developmentally later than 'here-and-now' reference. Nunan (1989) also notes that texts supported by photographs, drawings, tables and graphs are easier to understand. However, research to date has failed to show conclusively that tasks involving displaced reference are more complex than those involving contextually supported reference. Robinson's (1995) study, for example, failed to show that contextual support had a major impact on task performance.

Familiarity of information. Arguably, 'familiarity of information' relates to 'task difficulty' as much as to 'task complexity' as it concerns the relationship between the thematic content of the task and the individual learner's world knowledge. Prabhu, for example, comments 'learners' knowledge of the world can make tasks more or less difficult for them, depending on whether they are more or less familiar with purposes and constraints of the kind involved in the tasks' (1987: 88). However, I have included this factor here because it is perhaps best seen as a task factor rather than an individual difference factor. It clearly relates to the choice of thematic content for the task.

A number of task designers see familiarity of information as an important criterion influencing task complexity. Prabhu (1987) reports that high school children in India found tasks based on money earned and spent easier than those based on a bank account, as they had no personal experience of the latter. Candlin (1987) and Skehan (1998b) point out that asking learners to communicate about a topic they are unfamiliar with is inherently stressful. They discuss this factor under the general heading of 'communicative stress'.

Factors Relating to Task Conditions

In comparison to input factors, the relative complexity of task conditions has received little attention by task designers—an obvious omission. We will consider three factors that have been discussed in the literature: (1) conditions relating to the negotiation of meaning, (2) task demands and (3) the discourse mode required by the task.

Conditions influencing the negotiation of meaning. Markee notes that 'some tasks are psycholinguistically more difficult to complete than others' (1997: 98). He bases this claim on research that indicates that one-way tasks promote less negotiation of meaning than two-way tasks, which he sees as affecting the complexity of the task. A number of studies have found that providing learners with the opportunity to negotiate leads to more successful task outcomes (e.g. Gass and Varonis 1994; Ellis, Tanaka and Yamazaki 1994). One possible explanation is that negotiation increases the amount of time learners spend on tasks. If this is correct, then the other factors known to influence the amount of negotiation (i.e. information configuration, interaction requirement and orientation) may also play a role in task complexity.

Task demands. One condition that has received some attention is task demands, specifically whether the task imposes a single or a dual demand. Robinson (2001) notes that this has been investigated extensively in educational research by studying the effect on performance of adding a second to the main task. Robinson operationalized this factor in a map task in which the route to be described was either marked on the map (single task) or not marked thus requiring the learner to identify the route to be followed as well as describe it (dual task). Brown *et al.* (1984) and Yule and McDonald (1990) have operationalized dual task demands somewhat differently. They designed tasks that required one participant to describe the route marked on his/her map to another participant. The conditions differed in terms of whether the maps given to the participant contained referential conflicts. That is, they used maps that were the same for the participants (single task) and maps that differed in one or more features (dual task).

Discourse mode. Skehan's research has used a variety of tasks that differed in terms of whether they called for a monologue on the part of the participants or dialogue. Skehan (2001) proposes that dialogic tasks promote greater accuracy and complexity and monologic tasks greater fluency. This proposal would seem more relevant to the selection than the grading of tasks, however. Intuitively, dialogic tasks are easier than monologic tasks as they offer opportunities for the participants to scaffold each other's performance. Skehan (1996) suggests that the extent to which the participants are able to influence how the task is performed is a key factor in communicative stress; clearly, the opportunity to negotiate for meaning by means of requests for clarification in dialogic tasks is one way in which learners can exert control.

Factors Relating to the Process of Performing a Task
The nature of the cognitive operations required to complete the task has a major influence on task complexity. Here we will consider the role of the reasoning needed to complete a task. (There are, of course, many other options relating to the process of performing the task. However, these concern methodological procedures—e.g. whether or not to introduce a time limit for performing the task—and are not matters of task design. Therefore, they are not considered here. Ellis [2003: ch. 8] provides a detailed discussion of methodological procedures for using tasks.)

Reasoning needed. Of the three types of tasks that Prabhu (1987) used in the Communicational Language Teaching Project, information-gap tasks proved the easiest and opinion-gap tasks the most difficult, with reasoning-gap tasks intermediate. In the case of reasoning-gap tasks, Prabhu identified the reasoning needed as a key factor determining complexity: 'The "distance" between the information provided and the information arrived at as outcome—that is the number of steps involved in the deduction, inference, or calculation—is a measure of the relative difficulty of tasks' (1987: 87).

He gives as an example two tasks based on timetables, claiming that it was easier for students to work out a teacher's timetable from given class timetables than to use the same information to establish when the teachers were not teaching.

Factors Relating to Task Outcomes

Finally, we consider a number of factors that relate to the task outcomes: (1) the medium, (2) the scope, (3) the discourse domain and (4) the complexity of the outcome.

Medium of the outcome. As with input, the medium of the outcome is a potential factor influencing task complexity. Again, pictorial and written products may prove easier than oral products, especially if the latter involve a public presentation of some kind. However, this will again depend on the difficulty individual learners experience with the different media. Possibly the least complex outcome is one that involves some simple visual product such as a map, a drawing or a diagram as this poses no linguistic demands at the level of outcome. In effect tasks with such outcomes function as comprehension rather than production tasks. It would seem sensible to make use of simple comprehension tasks with beginner learners, who cannot be expected to speak or write in the L2 until they have developed some L2 competence. In Prabhu's procedural syllabus, the initial tasks did not require learner production; they consisted of instructions that students were required to act out to demonstrate their understanding, as in Total Physical Response (Asher 1977).

The scope of the outcome. There is no literature on the relative complexity of tasks with closed and open outcomes. Intuitively, tasks with closed outcomes will be easier in that the participants know there is a 'right' answer and thus can direct their efforts more purposefully and, perhaps, more economically.

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The discourse domain of the outcome. Similarly, there is no basis in research for determining which discourse domain poses the greatest cognitive demands. Intuitively, lists and descriptions are less of a challenge than instructions or arguments, with classification and narration intermediate. In general, however, the degree of complexity of these discourse domains will depend on the level of detail required in the product. Instructions, for example, can be more or less complex depending on the number and content of the specific directives.

Complexity of the outcome. Skehan identifies complexity of outcome as an important factor in decision-making tasks. He comments:

> Some tasks require only straightforward outcomes, in which a simple decision has to be made. Others require multi-faceted judgments, in which the case or position a learner argues during a task can only be effective if it anticipates other possible outcomes, and other learners' contributions (2001: 173).

Thus, the nature of the outcome impacts on the task performance, affecting the complexity of the arguments that need to be made. Prabhu makes a similar point noting that 'outcomes may need to be expressed in more or less precise terms' (1987: 88) and claims that the greater the precision, the more complex the task. Like Skehan, he sees the degree of precision as dependent on the number of plausible options that have to be addressed. Prabhu also points out that outcomes that involve a high level of precision also require greater lexical and syntactical accuracy.

Summary

Figure 2 summarizes the various criteria discussed above. Some of the criteria have a clear warrant in empirical research (e.g. the information type of the input and single/dual task demands). Other criteria, however, are obviously more speculative, the product of common sense rather than hard evidence. Ideally the various criteria should be weighted but it is not possible to do so with the present state of knowledge. We do not know with any certainty, for example, whether a task involving static but unfamiliar information is more or less difficult than a task involving abstract but familiar information. Nor do we know very much how the various criteria combine to determine task complexity. Also, as Prabhu points out 'no syllabus of generalized tasks can identify or anticipate all the sources of challenge to particular learners' (1987: 89). Thus grading tasks cannot follow a precise algorithmic procedure but rather must proceed intuitively

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in accordance with a general assessment of task complexity, informed by the criteria considered above and by the designer's experience of how particular groups of learners respond to different tasks.

Widdowson (1990) adopts a different position. He argues that we do not possess a sufficiently well-defined model of cognitive complexity to establish criteria for grading tasks and concludes that task-based syllabuses thus face exactly the same problem as linguistic syllabuses—they cannot be modelled on the sequence of language acquisition. Widdowson is clearly right in drawing attention to the difficulty of formulating grading criteria. However, his conclusion that tasks cannot be graded in ways that take account of how learners acquire L2s is unwarranted. It is arguably difficult if not impossible to determine what *linguistic* content learners will learn at specific points in their development but it is much more feasible to determine what tasks are suited to learners' general developmental level given that tasks allow learners to choose the linguistic (and non-linguistic) resources they will use to arrive at an outcome. Tasks, I would argue, do not need to be graded with the same level of precision as linguistic content. In a task-based syllabus the need to ensure an exact match between the teaching and the learner's syllabus no longer arises.

Thus, I would propose that course designers first assess the complexity of tasks informally and then use the criteria summarized in Figure 2 to fine-tune the validity of their assessment.

Incorporating a Focus on Form into a Task-Based Syllabus

Tasks, whether of the unfocused or focused kinds, need to be graded using the criteria summarized in Figure 2 as a guideline. In the case of focused tasks, however, consideration also needs to be given to how to incorporate a linguistic focus into the syllabus. I will now examine two different proposals for achieving this. The first proposal originates in work on content-based instruction (a kind of task-based approach) in school contexts with ESL learners, although it is arguably relevant to other teaching contexts. The second proposal involves a modular syllabus and is broadly applicable to all teaching situations.

An Integrated Approach
Content-based courses are premised on the assumption that learners will best learn language while they are engaged in learning subject content. However, such courses may not result in learners achieving high levels of

grammatical and sociolinguistic accuracy (Swain 1985). This has led content-based instructors to consider how a focus on form can be embedded into content-based teaching.

Criterion	Easy →	Difficult
A. Input		
1. Medium	Pictorial → written	→ oral
2. Code complexity	High-frequency vocabulary/ short and simple sentences	Low-frequency vocabulary/ complex sentence structure
3. Cognitive complexity		
a. Information type	Static → dynamic	→ abstract
b. Amount of information	Few elements/relationships	Many elements/relationships
c. Degree of structure	Well-defined structure	Little structure
d. Context dependency	Here-and-now orientation	There-and-then orientation
4. Familiarity of information	Familiar	Unfamiliar
B. Conditions		
1. Interactant relationship (negotiation of meaning)	Two-way	One-way
2. Task demands	Single task	Dual task
3. Discourse mode required to perform task	Dialogic	Monologic
C. Processes		
1. Cognitive operations		
a. Type	Exchanging → reasoning opinions	→ exchanging opinions
b. Reasoning need	Few steps involved	Many steps involved
D. Outcomes		
1. Medium	Pictorial	→ written → oral
2. Scope	Closed?	Open?
3. Discourse mode of task outcome	Lists; descriptions; narratives; classifications	→ instructions; arguments

→ indicates a continuum of difficulty

Figure 2. *Criteria for grading tasks*

Snow, Met and Genesee (1989) outline a conceptual framework for integrating language and content instruction. This gives priority to content. As Genesee puts it 'from the learners' point of view, activities in some integrated second language classrooms are about content and not about

language per se' (1994: 49). Thus the starting point in course design is the selection of tasks that are important and interesting to the learners, that are suited to their level of intellectual development and that contain some new elements. However, in designing such activities attention also needs to be paid to linguistic form. Met explains how this can be achieved: 'By selecting content from the schools' curriculum that is compatible with ESL objectives teachers can use the content as a communicative and cognitively engaging means of developing language and also help to promote mastery of content material' (1994: 163). Thus, course designers need to refer to both a content syllabus (based on the school curriculum) and a linguistic syllabus that specifies the forms the students need to master. The result is a set of focused tasks.

How then can course designers select content that is 'compatible with ESL objectives'? Snow, Genesee and Met suggest that this can be achieved by analysing the linguistic forms that arise in specific content domains. To this end they distinguish between *content-obligatory language* (i.e. the language that is required to learn a particular content) and *content-compatible language* (i.e. the language that can be usefully taught within the context of a particular content domain but which is not required for its successful mastery). For example, if the topic is 'gravity', content-obligatory language might include the lexical items 'to pull' and 'to force' and the use of apostrophe *'s* (e.g. 'the earth's gravity'). Content-compatible language might include such items as 'mass' and 'when' clauses (e.g. 'When we throw a ball up into the air...'). Snow, Met and Genesee propose that content-obligatory items for a given content domain be identified first. Secondly, content-compatible linguistic items can be drawn from three sources: (1) the second/foreign language curriculum, which provides a checklist of such items, (2) an assessment of learners' ongoing language needs and (3) the anticipated linguistic demands of the content curriculum. These items can then be incorporated into the content-based instruction. Snow, Met and Genesee illustrate how this approach can be used in mainstream classrooms with L2 learners, in pull-out ESL classes, in immersion classes and in foreign language classrooms.

Of course, attempts to integrate form and content in this way come up against the learnability problem, that is, learners may not be developmentally ready to process the linguistic forms that have been targeted for acquisition. We will now consider an alternative approach that in some ways is more practicable because it side-steps this problem.

A Modular Approach

In the kind of modular approach I have proposed elsewhere (see Ellis 2002), no attempt is made to integrate content and form. Instead, the syllabus is conceived of as two entirely separate modules—a communicative module and a code-based module. The communicative module constitutes the main component of such a syllabus. It consists of linguistically un-focused tasks, selected and graded with reference to the criteria outlined earlier. Students work their way systematically through this module, which provides opportunities to develop fluency, accuracy and complexity through message-centred activity. Of course, this does not mean that learners will not attend to form when they perform tasks in this module. Learners quite naturally attend to form while they are performing un-focused tasks and can be encouraged to do so through feedback from the teacher and through pre-emptive questioning about form (see Ellis, Bas-turkmen and Loewen 2001). But there is no attempt to predetermine which forms learners will attend to through the design of a task; any attention to form that is arises is entirely incidental.

The code-based module constitutes the secondary component of the syllabus. It consists of a checklist of linguistic features that are potentially difficult for learners to learn and serves a 'remedial' purpose by helping learners to acquire features that prove resistant to learning 'naturally'. The features in the code-based module could be taught in accordance with a focus-on-forms methodology (e.g. using present–practice–produce). How-ever, they could also be taught by means of focused tasks. But there would be no need to create any design links between the two components of the syllabus. Teachers would make their own decisions about when to call on the tasks in the code-based module based on their observations of what forms were in need of attention and their learners' readiness to process them.

In such a modular syllabus consideration needs to be given to the *staging* of the two components. Figure 3 below outlines one possible way. The beginning stages of the course would be devoted entirely to a module con-sisting of unfocused tasks. The code-based module would be introduced from the intermediate stage onwards, gradually assuming more of the total teaching time. The result is a version of the proportional curriculum model proposed by Yalden (1983). The rationale for such a model lies in the claim that early L2 acquisition is lexical in nature (e.g. Johnston 1986; Lewis 1993) and largely looks after itself as long as learners have access to input and opportunities to use the L2 (catered for by the module of

unfocused tasks). At this stage errors abound in learner language and there is little point in trying to address them as many of them will be eliminated fairly rapidly in natural ways. The need for a focus on form arises later, when learners have acquired some communicative ability and when they run the risk of fossilizing. The code-based module kicks in at this time with the goal of drawing attention to form in order to destabilize learners' interlanguage. In effect, this reverses the sequence found in traditional language curricula, where form is taught first and opportunities to communicate introduced later.
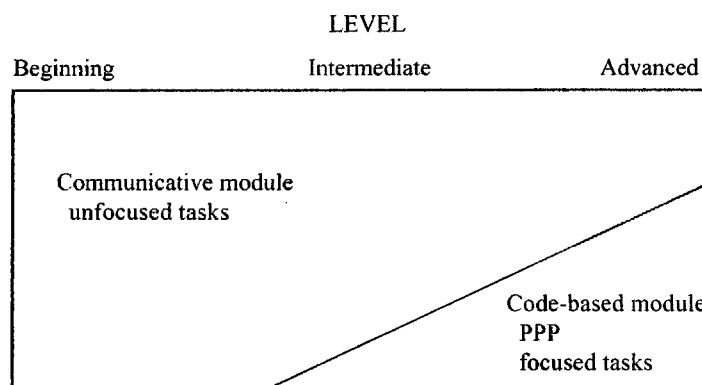
LEVEL

| Beginning | Intermediate | Advanced |

Communicative module
unfocused tasks

Code-based module
PPP
focused tasks

Figure 3. *A modular approach to designing a task-based syllabus*

Summary
I have outlined two ways of incorporating attention to form in a task-based programme. In the integrated syllabus recommended by Snow, Met and Genesee (1989) content and form are closely interwoven by identifying the content-obligatory and content-compatible language of each topic area in the curriculum. Such an approach reflects mainstream thinking about the importance of teaching form and meaning conjointly (see, e.g., Doughty 2001). However, it is demanding on the skills of the syllabus designer and there can be no guarantee that the links the designer establishes between form and meaning will be valid for the learner. A modular approach consisting of unrelated components of linguistically unfocused and focused tasks is arguably easier to design while remaining compatible with the process of L2 acquisition. Such an approach gives primacy to the kind of task-based syllabus proposed by Prabhu but also provides opportunities for form-focused work as learners develop and reach a stage where attention to form is likely to be of benefit to them.

Conclusion

In this article I have explored two aspects of task-based course design—how tasks can be sequenced and how a focus on form can be integrated into a task-based syllabus. These are both complex issues and it must be acknowledged that clear and non-controversial answers to the above questions are not available. Like Widdowson (1990), I remain sceptical of the ability of research to provide definitive answers (although I do think the research has proved valuable in illuminating the factors that need to be considered). However, this situation is not new, as similar issues relating to the design of more traditional syllabuses remain unresolved. 'Task' is a powerful construct for designing courses, as it constitutes the primary means for implementing the 'experiential strategy' in teaching (Stern 1990) and thus for ensuring that classroom learners have opportunities to communicate and to learn language through communicating. However, this strategy needs to be incorporate a focus on form, which can be achieved through the provision of a separate linguistic component utilizing traditional instructional devices (i.e. exercises) and/or focused tasks.

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