

'I'm still not sure what a task is': Teachers designing language tasks

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Abstract

Ellis (2003) identifies four key criteria that distinguish a 'task' from the types of situational grammar exercises that are typically found in the more traditional language classroom. This study investigates how well teachers were able to design tasks that fulfilled these four criteria (Ellis, 2003) at the end of a year-long professional development programme in which TBLT figured prominently. Forty-three tasks designed by the teachers for use in their own foreign language classrooms are analysed against Ellis's four criteria in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the professional development programme, on the premise that adequate understanding of the construct of task underpins successful implementation of TBLT. The findings show that some aspects of task-design were difficult for teachers. Implications for professional development programmes that focus on TBLT, such as the one whose effectiveness is evaluated here, are discussed.

Keywords

foreign language learning, language task, professional development, TBLT, teacher education

I Introduction

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is viewed as a development within the Communicative Language Teaching movement (Littlewood, 2014), having been described as the 'strong version' of this approach (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). It is motivated by theories of learning, drawing on the idea that learners best learn when they are actively involved in constructing their own knowledge through experience and problem solving (Dewey, 1913, as cited in Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). It proposes that students will acquire language through the process of completing tasks that require meaningful communication.

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For the past 20 years TBLT has attracted much attention, gaining, according to Andon and Eckerth (2009), the status of a 'new orthodoxy'. It has become the dominant approach to teaching in many contexts and is officially endorsed in some countries (e.g. Carless, 2004; Van den Branden, 2006).

Ellis (2009) outlines a number of principles, which he suggests will facilitate the successful implementation of TBLT in a given educational context. One of these is that teachers need to have a clear understanding of what a language task is. Andon and Eckerth (2009) also point to a relationship between the successful implementation of TBLT and teachers' understanding of the concepts of a task and task-based teaching.

II Background

I The task as construct

In TBLT the primary unit for designing a language programme and for planning individual lessons is the 'task' (Ellis, 2009). However, there has been a lack of consistency in the way that the language task has been defined (Ellis, 2003). Definitions drawn from both research and pedagogic literature include those by Breen (1989), Skehan (1996), Bygate, Skehan and Swain (2001) and others, all of which differ in scope. Van den Branden (2006) points out that, despite differences, the various definitions nevertheless share a common understanding, that is, that people not only learn language in *order* to make functional use of it, but also that they learn *by* making functional use of it. He goes on to stress that, in understanding the construct of task, the primacy of meaning and of the learner functioning as user, and not just learner, are key. He further points out that some definitions identify the importance of the learner drawing on his or her own linguistic and cognitive resources in task completion.

Ellis (2012) proposes a set of definitional criteria against which a given activity may be judged as more or less task-like. These are first introduced in Ellis (2003, p. 35) as a way of 'assessing with some rigour to what extent an activity is a task'. Ellis claims that these criteria draw on definitions provided by Bygate et al. (2001), Samuda & Bygate (2008) and Willis (1996). He further elaborates on and explains these four key criteria, which are presented below, in Ellis and Shintani (2013, p. 135).

1. The primary focus should be on 'meaning' (i.e. learners should be mainly concerned with encoding and decoding messages, not with focusing on linguistic form).
2. There should be some kind of 'gap' (i.e. a need to convey information, to express an opinion or to infer meaning).
3. Learners should largely rely on their own resources (linguistic and non-linguistic) in order to complete the activity. That is, learners are not 'taught' the language they will need to perform the task, although they may be able to 'borrow' from the input the task provides to help them perform it.
4. There is a clearly defined outcome other than the use of language (i.e. the language serves as the means for achieving the outcome, not as an end in its own right). Thus, when performing a task, learners are not primarily concerned with using language correctly but rather with achieving the goal stipulated by the task'.

Ellis (2003) demonstrates, using examples, how these four criteria can be applied to discriminate tasks from 'situational grammar exercises'. He explains that contrary to Widdowson's (2003) claim that the definition of a task is problematic, that it is rather the application of the definitional criteria that is problematic (Ellis, 2012).

However, even with consensual agreement about what the key components of a language task might be, Nunan (1989, p. 11) contends that it is not always easy to distinguish a task from an exercise and that 'making decisions will always be partly intuitive and judgemental'. Ellis (2003) is not insensitive to this problem, agreeing that differentiating tasks and situational grammar exercises may be problematic as some activities have features of both. In Ellis (2009) he makes the point that criteria two and three of the four criteria outlined in Ellis (2003) may be satisfied by a situational grammar exercise but that criteria 1 and 4 are unlikely to be, these being the key criteria for an activity to be task-like.

Littlewood (2004) argues for thinking in terms of dimensions rather than aiming for a consensus in terms of a definition of a task. He proposes a continuum, at one end of which a situational grammar exercise would encourage a learner to focus on forms, and, at the other end, would encourage a focus on meaning. He places a 'task' midway (at the level of communicative language practice which allows for the practice of pre-taught language in a context where it communicates new information) and extending to the right of the continuum. At the right hand (focus on meaning) end of this continuum authentic communication would involve using language in situations where meanings are unpredictable. A second continuum determines the level of the learner's active personal involvement with the task. The fact that thinking of the distinction between a task and a situational grammar exercise as one that is 'continuous', rather than 'dichotomous', is viable and helpful is also acknowledged in Ellis and Shintani (2013).

2 *The task as workplan*

The task as construct becomes the task as workplan in the hands of the teacher as he/she crafts a lesson for the language classroom. At this stage the task as workplan is viewed from the perspective of the designer; it is the student, who will experience the task as process (Ellis, 2003). Ellis (2003) asks whether it is the task as workplan or the task as process that should be examined to decide whether an activity is a 'task'. The definitions previously discussed adopt a task-designer's perspective and it is the intention of the designer that is the focus in this study. However, it is important to recognize that the gap between the task as workplan and the task as process can be wide and that the predictions made by the designer and the anticipated use of language may not always result (Breen, 1987; Ellis, 2003). However, while the relationship between the task as workplan and the task as process may not be perfect, it does, nevertheless, exist (Ellis, 2009).

3 *Criticism of TBLT*

A new approach to language teaching is seldom without its critics and TBLT is no exception. Seedhouse (2005), for example, argues that a task is not a valid construct on which to base a language teaching programme. Sheen (1994) claims that the TBLT approach is relevant

only to the second language classroom, because, in foreign language learning, there is no opportunity for students to communicate outside of the classroom, and therefore no rationale to work at tasks that would be applicable to a wider context. Swan (2005) maintains that TBLT is unsuitable for beginner learners because unless they have a foundation in grammar they will not be able to communicate. Ellis (2009), however, counters these arguments by saying that it is wrong to assume that TBLT requires only production and points out the difference between input-providing tasks and output-prompting tasks. He refers to Prabhu's (1987) examples of tasks that require beginner learners to work only with language input and maintains that an input-based approach will enable students to build the grammatical resources they need for language production. He also claims that TBLT is well suited to an acquisition-poor or foreign language learning context in that it gives students, inside the classroom, the opportunities to communicate that they lack outside of the classroom.

4 Educating teachers about TBLT

There has been widespread acknowledgement in the literature that teachers tend to embark on teacher professional development/education programmes with pre-formed ideas about what constitutes best practice and that these ideas tend to act as a filter to new information, with the result that beliefs and consequently practice may not be changed (Kagan, 1992; Velez-Rendon, 2006). There is an emerging body of literature documenting the results of initiatives that attempt to equip teachers so that they can adapt their classroom practice to TBLT.

Ellis and Shintani (2013) note that key difficulties that teachers may experience with introducing TBLT into their classrooms may relate to problems firstly, in understanding what a task and/or a task-based approach to language teaching really is and, second, to problems in implementing a task-based approach in a particular context.

There is considerable evidence that teachers have problems understanding what a task-based approach to language learning really means (Littlewood, 2004). Carless (2004) found that teachers in primary school classrooms in Hong Kong reconciled task-based approaches with their own understanding of tasks. Clark, Lo, Hui, Kam, Carless and Wong (1999) also found that teachers had difficulty interpreting and implementing tasks in a Hong Kong primary school context. Chan (2012) documents teachers, also in Hong Kong, having difficulty in understanding TBLT as introduced through an in-service professional development programme. More recently, Hu (2013), through a series of interviews and classroom observations, found that Chinese teachers of English in Beijing understood the notion of tasks differently. Zheng and Borg (2014), with the aim of using their findings to inform the provision of teacher education, also examined what happened in the classroom when Chinese teachers of English tried to implement a task-based curriculum. They found that TBLT was interpreted rather narrowly, and misunderstood as providing students with opportunities to speak English in pairs or groups.

There are, however, successful examples of task-based education initiatives. McDonough and Chaikitmongkol (2007) report evidence that teachers clearly understood what constituted a task following a task-based course for students at Chang

Mai University in Thailand. Linsen (1994, as cited in Van den Branden, 2009) and Van den Branden (2006) both document that the implementation of TBLT in Flemish education has been a success, particularly in the primary school context. Van den Branden does caution, however, that TBLT can take a number of years to be fully integrated into school practice.

Ellis (2003) recognizes that language teachers have been slow to recognize the value of tasks and suggests that an alternative to presenting teachers with the notion that they should design whole courses around tasks, is to encourage them to incorporate tasks along with more traditional approaches to teaching. He suggests that this is a task-supported rather than a task-based approach to language teaching. In a task-supported approach there is an emphasis on the use of tasks to help students develop language fluency rather than on the use of tasks as a means by which learners acquire new language or restructure their interlanguages. Arguably, a task-supported approach is more client-centred (Widdowson, 1993) in that it does not impose recommendations on teachers but leaves them with the agency to try out and respond to new ideas in their own teaching contexts. Erlam (2008) partially attributes the success of a Ministry of Education funded professional development initiative to the fact that it adopted a client-centred approach. The practitioners involved were encouraged to reflect on how the information they had been given could be relevant for them, rather than being told to adopt new practices.

III The study

I Rationale for the present study

The introduction of TBLT has tended to be top-down and much TBLT-oriented research has been conducted in either laboratory or controlled settings. Carless claims that TBLT is under-researched in state school settings (Carless, 2004) and, more particularly, with younger learners (Carless, 2012). Another context that has been overlooked in research on TBLT is its application to the teaching of modern languages other than English. Research has primarily been focused on the teaching of English in foreign or second language contexts (Klapper, 2003).

The present study was conducted in the New Zealand state school context where there has been considerable attention to and promotion of TBLT (East, 2012) following the introduction of a new school curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007). It aimed to investigate how language teachers, teaching modern languages other than English to young language learners, understand and interpret a language task after completion of an in-service professional development programme. The main rationale for the study was an evaluation of the success of the programme in helping teachers to develop a clear understanding of a task, on the premise that this would be a necessary prerequisite for them to be able to successfully implement TBLT in their teaching contexts. The study, therefore, investigated the 'task as workplan', looking at how the tasks that the teachers designed fulfilled the four criteria proposed by Ellis (2003). It was anticipated that results of the study might suggest where changes could be made to the programme in order to address any gaps in teachers' understanding. The study had been initially motivated by

the teacher who commented at the end of the year-long programme 'I'm still not sure what a task is'.

2 Research questions

The questions that the study asked are as follows:

1. How successful are language teachers in designing, for their own foreign language classrooms, language tasks that satisfy the four criteria proposed by Ellis (2003)?
2. In designing language tasks for the classroom, which of the four Ellis (2003) criteria do teachers find most difficult to satisfy?
3. In designing language tasks for the classroom, which of the four Ellis (2003) criteria do teachers find easiest to satisfy?

IV Method

1 Participants

The participants in this study were all qualified and experienced teachers in New Zealand schools¹ and were enrolled in TPD (Teacher Professional Development), a year-long Ministry of Education funded professional development programme aimed to equip teachers to teach a foreign language effectively in their classroom/school. The programme is primarily aimed to cater for teachers of students in Years 7 to 10 (i.e. students approximately 11 to 14 years of age) but under-subscription from this target group allows for the participation of teachers outside of this age range (for a breakdown of the teachers in this study, see Table 1). The programme addresses the needs of both non-specialist teachers teaching an additional language for the first time and those of experienced language teachers. The languages that the programme caters for are: French, Spanish, German, Japanese, Mandarin, Samoan, Tongan, Cook Is Maori, Tokelauan, Niuean (see Table 1). For the majority of students in New Zealand learning the non-Pasifika languages in this list, the language learning context would be one that is 'acquisition-poor', that is, there would be no, or very little, exposure to the target language outside of the classroom. As discussed previously, TBLT is perhaps particularly well suited to such contexts because it provides opportunities for learners to communicate inside the classroom, when they do not have these outside the classroom (Ellis, 2009).

The Pasifika languages have the status of community languages in New Zealand and students in these language classrooms may be learning the language as a second or heritage language. While the year levels in Table 1 give information about the age range of students that the participants in the study were teaching languages to, they do not give any information about the level of language learning of these students. This information can only be approximated because it is based on the length of time that students have been learning the language. Thirty teachers (70% of the present data set) were teaching

a language to students who were receiving instruction in their first year of learning the language (referred to as beginner learners in this study). Twelve teachers (28%) were teaching a language to students in their second year of study of the language² (referred to as elementary learners). Exposure to the language varied enormously between school contexts. Some teachers taught their students for one lesson only a week (some lessons were as short as 45 minutes), others several lessons a week, whereas other teachers reported that, because they were responsible for teaching all curriculum areas to their class, they could use the target language during other lessons. It is obvious, however, that for the vast majority of cases, the students were at beginner or elementary level in terms of their language learning.

Table 1. Breakdown of class year level.

Class year	Number of teachers
8	12
10	10
9	8
7	4
6, 5	2 at each level
Adult, 12, 4, 2, 1	1 at each level
Total	43

Table 2. Languages taught.

Language	Number of teachers
French	12
Japanese	11
Spanish	9
Mandarin	7
German	2
Samoan, Tongan	1 each
Total	43

2 TPDL programme content

The TPDL programme has been running since 2005 and comprises three main components; for more information see Insley and Thomson (2008). Teachers are, first, strongly encouraged to improve their language proficiency by pursuing language study targeted at their level of proficiency in the target language that they are teaching. The ‘in-school support’ component of the programme provides for teachers to be visited and observed four times during the year as they teach a language lesson. It aims to assist teachers apply

theory and practice presented in the 'second language acquisition' (SLA) pedagogy component and it evaluates teachers' teaching practice against key standards. The SLA component is a Stage 3 University course (i.e. a course which would normally be taken in the third year of a University programme) which is delivered over four two-day blocks. The researcher has taught on the pedagogy component of the programme since 2011.

The theoretical framework that underpins the programme is Ellis's (2005) 10 Principles of Effective Instructed Language Acquisition. In the 'in-school support' component of the programme teachers' classroom practice is evaluated for evidence of these 10 principles (regrettably there is not room for further discussion of these in this paper). TBLT is seen as a methodology that allows for the successful implementation of Ellis's principles in the classroom. There is, therefore, a strong focus on TBLT in the programme, although teachers are introduced to the notion of a task-supported methodology in the recognition that there are other methodologies and that they, as practitioners are best able to decide to what extent they will incorporate tasks in their ongoing classroom practice.

Teachers are primarily introduced to TBLT during the pedagogy component of the course. They are told that there are a number of ways of describing/defining tasks and are, at different times, exposed to Skehan's (1996) and Willis's (1996) definitions. However, it is Ellis's criteria that are given prominence in the course, as these are the criteria that are presented in the section of their course handbook that explains TBLT and the criteria against which all tasks that they work with in class are evaluated. Teachers are given a number of lectures on the topic of TBLT (e.g. Introduction to TBLT, Types of tasks, Designing tasks, Planning lessons and units of work using a task-supported approach). They are also repeatedly exposed to language tasks throughout the programme, in the recognition that transmitting only the theory of TBLT would be extremely limiting (Van den Branden, 2009). For example, at their 'Introduction meeting' teachers are given a task to complete that will help them get to know other participants (each participant is given a different question to answer as they interact amongst themselves, e.g. who has been to the most exotic place?; who has a relative with the most unusual name?). While this is not a 'language -learning' task in that participants complete it in English, the fact that it fulfils Ellis's four key criteria (2003) is highlighted upon completion. Throughout the pedagogy course teachers complete a range of tasks and discuss and evaluate them together. A number of these they complete in their 'language groups' (i.e. using the language that they are learning/teaching to complete the task). For example, they play an Animal board game together or complete a task called 'what's in the teacher's handbag?' where they have to agree on and draw up a list of the 10 items that they think are in the handbag on the table in front of them. They also complete at least one 'memory card game' task requiring them to read Te reo Maori (a language which all but a small minority would have familiarity with at the word level only) and designed to demonstrate how an input-based task can be designed to encourage learners to notice language form. Following completion of each one of these tasks, the lecturer draws attention to Ellis's criteria (2003), asking participants' opinions as to whether or not, and how, the task fulfils the four criteria. Finally, the main assessment component of the course (worth 50%) requires teachers to plan, teach and evaluate a task-based lesson, collecting evidence of its effectiveness. They are told that the aim of this assignment is to help give

them the skills that they would need to implement a task-supported methodology and also to give them the experience of conducting a principled investigation into the effectiveness of their teaching. This 'Learning Inquiry' is presented to the rest of the group and handed in as a written assignment for grading purposes. These assignments form the data set for the current study. A total of 43 teachers agreed to make their written Learning Inquiry assignments available.

3 Data sources/type

The focus of this research was on the language task as a workplan, so the researcher focused on teachers' written descriptions of their tasks (including pre-task, task and post task) as they intended to teach them in the language classroom rather than on what was actually achieved. If, for example, students did not achieve the task outcome, but the teacher had planned for an outcome that fulfilled the criteria of a task, they were credited for this. On some occasions, however, because in the assignment teachers had to evaluate their tasks, teachers' comments were useful in giving some additional indication either about what their task was really like and/or what they had intended. For example, the admission by one teacher that his task was weak because it was obvious that his students were not functioning as language users (it being understood that it had not been designed to enable this) served to confirm the researcher's rating conclusion.

One category, however, for which the researcher did depend more particularly on a description of what the teacher did and/or of what happened in the classroom, was criteria three, the requirement that students rely on their own linguistic resources. Here it was necessary to know exactly what language support the students had during the completion of the task, information that teachers did not always adequately cover in their task workplan description.

4 Data analysis/coding

The Learning Inquiry tasks were coded against the four criteria presented above under 'The task as construct' (Ellis, 2012; Ellis & Shintani, 2013). The questions that the coder asked in each case and the answers that were expected for the task to meet these criteria are in Table 3. In each case both questions had to be answered correctly in order for the criteria to be coded as respected. Because most of the teachers in this study were teaching learners who had had no or very limited exposure to the language outside of the classroom, there was, as has already been explained, an emphasis on a task-supported approach (Ellis, 2003), that is, the use of tasks as a means by which learners could activate their existing knowledge of the L2 for the purpose of developing fluency. Therefore the researcher added, for the third criterion, the following question: 'Does the task allow learners to automatize/use language they have already been taught on a previous occasion?' The conceptualization of a 'task' as presented in Table 3 corresponds with what Littlewood (2004) placed midway and to the right of his 'focus on forms/focus on meaning' continuum at the level of communicative language practice (practising pre-taught language in a context where it communicates new information, e.g. information-gap activities or 'personalized' questions).

Table 3. Questions relating to coding of criteria.

	Questions	Required answer
1	The primary focus should be on meaning Does the learner function as a language user and not a language learner? Is the learner primarily concerned with encoding and decoding messages, not with focusing on linguistic form?	yes yes
2	There should be some kind of gap Is this gap closed as a result of the communication that takes place? As a result of the communication does the learner find out something they didn't know?	yes yes
3	Learners should have to rely on their own resources (linguistic and non-linguistic) So that they can do the task, are the learners 'taught' the language they will need? Does the task allow learners to automatize/use language they have already been taught on a previous occasion?	no yes
4	There is a clearly defined outcome other than the use of language Does the language serve as a means for achieving the outcome rather than as an end in its own right? Does achieving the outcome determine when the task is completed?	yes yes

For each of the above criteria, two tasks are presented, in Table 4, from the data set of the current study, one that fulfilled the criterion and another that didn't. Comments from the researcher that explain how and why each task did or did not meet the specified criteria are in italics.

At times there is overlap between criteria – for example, the teaching of the partitive articles (see 'not fulfilled' under 'rely on own resources') meant that there was not a consistent focus on meaning because of the expectation that learners would be focused on linguistic form while completing the task.

5 Reliability

The researcher coded all 43 tasks herself and then gave 23 of the tasks to an independent rater, a PhD student researching in the area of TBLT. The researcher used two tasks (separate from the 23) to discuss with and train the second rater. The second rater then rated eight tasks on her own, following which she and the researcher discussed any differences. The researcher revised one rating as a result. The second rater then rated a further 15 tasks. Percentage agreements for the four categories for the 23 tasks are displayed in Table 5. It is perhaps not surprising that coding for 'Learners should have to rely on their own resources' produced the lowest rate of agreement, given the degree of subjectivity involved in making this judgement. This was largely related to the fact that, as previously mentioned, teachers did not always provide enough information for a more reliable assessment of this criterion.

Table 4. Tasks that did and did not meet criteria.

Fulfilled	Not fulfilled
<p><i>Focus on meaning:</i></p> <p>Beginner learners of Spanish had to design a teenager's ideal bedroom. They then presented their bedrooms in Spanish to the class who voted on the best. <i>Students were using language to communicate their own meaning/encoding and decoding messages, rather than just functioning as language learners.</i></p> <p><i>Some kind of gap:</i></p> <p>Beginner students of German were to play 'Battleships'. Each student needed to position submarines and destroyers on a numbered grid. Then in pairs, facing each other so they could not see their partner's grid, they had to aim 'hits' to destroy their opponent's navy. <i>Students did not know where their opponent's navy was on the grid (gap). Each 'hit' was a guess and their partner's response told them whether or not they had been successful.</i></p> <p><i>Rely on own resources:</i></p> <p>Elementary learners of French were, in small groups, to plan and present a 5-course French menu. In a pre-task students were reminded of the prior learning they had done in a unit on French cuisine and the resources such as homework sheets that they could draw on to help them. <i>Students are reminded of the language they already have been exposed to that might help them with this task.</i></p> <p><i>Clearly defined outcome:</i></p> <p>In pairs, beginner learners of Mandarin were given the role of 'speaker' and 'listener-artist'. The 'speaker' had to create an oral description of a person that the listener then drew and coloured ... 'the visual outcome was a measure of students' attempts to negotiate meaning'. <i>The completed picture was distinct from the use of language and determined when the task was completed.</i></p>	<p>Beginner learners of Spanish had to collect cards that matched their own in terms of colours. They asked the question <i>que color te gusta</i> ('what colour do you like?') to find out what colour their partner had on their card. <i>The question students asked had no relation to their own colour preferences. It neither needed to be encoded nor decoded for the game to succeed. Students were using language as learners only.</i></p> <p>Elementary learners of Japanese had to discuss the opening hours of a restaurant or business on a picture they were given to look at together. <i>No gap was closed as a result of this communication and learners did not find out anything they didn't already know.</i></p> <p>Beginner students of French had to buy and sell groceries at small shops set up around the classroom. In the pre-task, students were taught vocabulary for food items, for shops and some expressions that they would need for conversations in shops. They were then taught the use of partitive articles with nouns with the expectation that they would use these when asking for food items. <i>Students were taught the language they needed immediately prior to performing the task.</i></p> <p>In pairs, beginner learners of Mandarin were to devise questions that they would ask of each other. The outcome was 'that students will use the data they collect to answer their questions'. <i>The use of the language was not distinct from achieving the outcome.</i></p>

Table 5. Percentage agreement with the second rater for all criteria.

Criteria	Percentage agreement
1. Primary focus on meaning	100%
2. Some kind of gap	100%
3. Learners relying on own resources	87%
4. Clearly defined outcome	91%

IX Results

The first research question asked how successful the teachers were in designing tasks that fulfilled the four Ellis criteria (2003). Of the 43 tasks in the data set, 20 (47%) fulfilled all of the four Ellis criteria (2003). A further 15 (35%) fulfilled three out of the four criteria, meaning that a total of 82% of all the tasks fulfilled three or more criteria. There was only one task that was rated as fulfilling none of the criteria.

The second research question investigated those criteria of task design that teachers found most difficult to satisfy. The most difficult criterion for teachers to satisfy was the third: learners need to rely on their own resources. Twenty-eight tasks (67%) respected this criterion, 15 did not. The second criterion that teachers in this study found difficult to fulfil was the second: there needs to be some kind of gap. There were 34 tasks (79% of the data set) that incorporated, in their design, a ‘communication’ gap whereby learners found out something that they didn’t already know. Nine tasks did not incorporate a gap in their design.

The third research question focused on the criteria of task design that teachers found easier to satisfy. The criterion that was easiest for teachers to satisfy in their task design was the last one: there is a clearly defined outcome other than the use of language. Thirty-nine tasks (90%) satisfied this criterion, only five did not. The first criterion: there should be a primary focus on meaning, was one that teachers found relatively easy to satisfy. This criterion was respected by thirty-six teachers (84%); only seven teachers had difficulty fulfilling it.

V Discussion

Results demonstrated that almost half of the teachers on the programme (47%) were able to demonstrate that they could incorporate all four of the key components of a task in their design. Furthermore, more than three quarters of teachers were able to incorporate three of the key components. If one considers that being able to fulfil three of the key components of task design is evidence of an activity that is placed further towards Littlewood’s (2004) ‘focus on meaning’ end than the ‘focus on forms’ end, then this is a pleasing result in terms of the course objectives of the TPD L programme.

There are a number of possible reasons that could explain why the criterion that was most difficult to implement was the one requiring learners to rely on their own resources. One stand-out feature of all 43 tasks in this data set was that they were all primarily³ designed as output-prompting rather than input-providing tasks (Ellis, 2012). It is not

entirely clear why teachers did not design input-providing tasks, which were presented to teachers during their pedagogy course. A possible reason is that the 'in-school support' component of the programme required teachers to teach lessons where students were engaged in language production, which may have inadvertently given the message that input-providing tasks were not suitable for their assignments. Another possible reason is that the wording of the four Ellis criteria, which the teachers were continuously exposed to during the course, predominantly refers to production tasks, or, at least the wording facilitates the impression that this is the case. For example, Ellis's (2003, p. 9) description of a 'gap' as something that 'motivates learners to use language' suggests productive rather than receptive language. Considering the fact that the learners for whom these 'output-prompting' tasks were designed were, almost without exception, at elementary/beginner level in terms of proficiency, it is perhaps not surprising that teachers experienced difficulty in crafting tasks which would allow them to depend on their own resources. An examination of those 16 tasks that did not respect this third criterion shows that, making sure that the gap between the learners' level of proficiency and the level demanded by the task did not become too wide (Van den Branden, 2006), was difficult for many teachers to achieve. An example was a teacher of Year 9 beginner learners of Mandarin who told students that they were to make a questionnaire and carry out a class survey to find out who was most like them in terms of daily routine. When the teacher realized that the students seemed confused, she taught 'a wide range [of] vocabulary and structures', including question forms. This meant that students were heavily reliant on this new language when completing the task, rather than on linguistic resources that they already had. It also meant that students might have had difficulty encoding and decoding messages (Criterion 1) because of the requirement to focus on new linguistic forms. It is interesting to note that this teacher was aware of the problem, commenting in their task evaluation that 'students were not quite ready for the task ... they didn't internalize the target language and use it for communication'. This teaching of vocabulary and structures would seem to violate Ellis and Shintani's (2013) specification that learners not be 'taught the language they need to complete the task'. The difference, however, between teaching and 'borrowing from the input' to complete the task, which Ellis and Shintani do allow, might not always be clear. An example of 'borrowing from the input' could be the two teachers who had designed tasks that allowed students to draw on their own resources, but who commented on the fact that another time they would include greater opportunities for students to be exposed to language input prior to starting the task (an example of what Willis and Willis (2007) would call a priming function, as discussed further below). Both teachers specifically mentioned listening activities. One of these teachers had her Year 12 intermediate level learners of Japanese plan a party and negotiate consensus about time, music, food and so on. She commented that as a pre-task she could have had 'a brief listening task ... where learners were exposed to a group of native speakers arranging a party.'

Another problem that seemed evident from the data was that some teachers designed tasks that did not integrate well with previous language lessons. One reason for this could be that the way the assignment was presented, requiring the design and evaluation of a 'one-off' lesson, did not encourage teachers to think of how the task they taught could arise out of, and complement, other work. One example was the teacher who asked her Year 10 elementary students of Spanish to find the best person in the class for them

to go on holiday with in terms of similar interests. She drew up and modelled for them a grid of questions they could ask but found in her evaluation that students tended to stick too closely to this template even asking classmates the incomplete question ‘where do you want ...?’, rather than completing it with an appropriate phrase such as ‘to ski, dance’ and so on. In her evaluation she commented on the need to be clearer about planning a ‘language intention’ and confessed that she had thought only of the task and not its place within a curriculum – ‘I had not thought about ... [where] this task would fit in the larger picture of the topic or year in general.’

Another reason that teachers found this criterion difficult to implement seemed to stem from their understanding of how a focus on form related to the sequencing of a task-based lesson. They had been taught that a task-based sequence did not start with a focus on new grammar as it is unlikely that learners can use an unfamiliar form to communicate meaningfully within the same lesson sequence (Willis and Willis, 2007). A pre-task should, therefore, not include new grammar, but could provide learners with key relevant vocabulary in what Willis and Willis (2007, p. 24) term a ‘priming’ function. In coding the tasks then, to establish to what extent they met this third criterion, the researcher was looking for tasks that did not require learners to use grammatical forms that they had not already been taught in a prior lesson. The wording of the criterion ‘rely on their own linguistic resources’, whilst explained in class on a number of occasions, may not have been the best way of reminding the teachers that this would preclude a focus on new grammar prior to the task. Furthermore, many of the teachers in the programme were familiar with and had been trained to teach according to the PPP lesson format, which does start with the presentation of grammar (Richards & Rodgers, 2014), and, it would seem, that this different way of thinking about grammar was difficult for them. Zheng and Borg (2014) also found that teachers had difficulty understanding the role of grammar in TBLT, documenting the case of a teacher whose lessons took the form of grammatical explanations and then controlled practice.

The wording of this criterion has already been mentioned. It is possible that teachers, despite explanations, may not have fully understood what is meant by ‘own linguistic resources’. It is perhaps not clear, for example, whether a student ‘borrowing language from input’ is relying on their ‘own resources’ or not. In fact this criterion is meant to allow learners the final choice of which language they should use in order to complete the task, rather than specifying or prescribing the language they should draw on (Ellis, 2003), but this may not have been understood by the participants in this study.

An example of a task that was appropriate in terms of the level of language proficiency of the learners it was designed for, and in terms of how it was supported by previous work covered in class, was taught to a Year 10 class of French students. The teacher described these students, who were in their second year of French, as academically above average. They had, in a previous lesson, been exposed to the use of the French comparative and the terms *plus* (‘more’) or *moins* (‘less’), so that the comparative was not a new and unfamiliar language form for them. In a pre-task students were asked to solve animal riddles by asking questions (e.g. *tu es un lion?* ‘are you a lion?’) of the teacher, who replied using comparative expressions such as *non, mais je suis aussi dangereux qu’un lion* (‘no but I am as dangerous as a lion’). In the task itself, students made up their own riddles which they then had their classmates and the class as a whole solve. It is interesting to note that the pre-task required students to work with

language input and it was only in the task itself that students were given opportunities to produce language.

The second criterion that teachers found difficult to respect was ‘there needs to be some kind of gap’. This may be due to ambiguity in the way that this criterion could be understood. According to Ellis and Shintani (2013) task design should incorporate the need to express an opinion, to convey information or infer meaning. In doing this, students may well be facing a gap in their linguistic knowledge and pushing their linguistic resources to negotiate the meaning of words or structures that they don’t know.

It is interesting to note that some teachers in this study understood that the ‘gap’ was the gap in language knowledge, rather than a communicative gap (it is perhaps unfortunate that the same word ‘gap’ is used in these two different ways). One teacher said: ‘the students’ gap in knowledge was the ability to express likes and dislikes’ and another mentioned the ‘authentic gap in their knowledge’ of ‘not knowing how to read Chinese characters’. A third teacher had actually designed a task that included a communication gap, in that students had to find out where hidden treasure was, but she did not identify this feature of the task as the one that fulfilled the criterion of a gap. Instead she said: ‘there was definitely a gap as my students had not used or heard of this new vocabulary’. One task planned for a gap but there wasn’t one – students had to design children’s books but there was no ‘audience’ of readers. Other similar tasks did have ‘audiences’ but, because there was no purpose for the audience to listen or read (Klapper, 2003), it was difficult to know to what extent a gap had been closed, something had been ‘found out’ or even that the ‘audience’ had engaged at any level with what had been communicated (however, because there was an ‘audience’ these tasks were coded by the researcher as having a gap). One example was the teacher who had her Year 5 beginner students of French perform mini- dramas to their classmates. She commented ‘it was a task, but not a very good one. There wasn’t much of a gap apart from the audience observing. I justified it by saying the gap was the audience’.

From these difficulties that some of the participants in this study demonstrate in understanding the definitional criteria against which an activity can be judged as being task-like or not (Ellis, 2003; Ellis & Shintani, 2013), it is interesting to reflect on the extent to which these criteria are unambiguous or, indeed, even accessible to language teachers. Examples discussed suggest that they are open to being interpreted in ways that are not intended and, furthermore, that a correct interpretation may require an understanding of some of the more complex theoretical principles underlying second language learning (e.g. the notion that learners cannot attend to meaning and form at the same time). The challenge for the language teacher educator is, perhaps, first, to consider to what extent the criteria could be reworded so as to deal with any ambiguity, and, second, to consider how the technical knowledge of second language acquisition research (Ellis, 1997) may be made accessible to the practitioner.

Teachers in this study found it relatively easy to incorporate a ‘clearly defined outcome other than the use of language’ in their task design. For many tasks, the outcome was winning a game (e.g. Go Fish or Happy families), a completed picture or the information that had been found out as a result of a class survey. These outcomes corroborate Van den Branden’s recommendations (2006, p. 60) that teachers select, for beginner language learners, relatively neutral or universal worlds, ‘for instance the world of playing games’, that enable students to work in contexts about which

they already have knowledge. A creative and, for the Year 8 beginner students of Japanese, very pertinent example of the latter was the survey completed in order to find out what activity the class, as a whole, felt should replace the cancelled PE class that had left a gap in their weekly timetable.

One possible reason why teachers found this criterion easier is the younger age group of students represented in this study. Only two teachers taught students above Year 10, meaning that 41 out of the 43 teachers taught students at Year 10 (approximate age 14) or below. Furthermore, a majority of classes (23) were at primary or intermediate level, rather than secondary. Teachers were perhaps, very aware that students would, in order to be motivated to complete a task, need a goal that would be other than the use of the language itself. Also pertinent is the fact that, for many of these students, particularly those at secondary level, learning a foreign/second language was an option rather than a curriculum requirement, and that teachers had therefore learnt to be very adept at making language learning fun and enjoyable, in the hope that students would be motivated to continue. The outcome of a task is not so much an end in itself as a means to motivate the learners to complete it (Dörnyei, 2002).

The criterion: 'there should be a primary focus on meaning', was one that teachers found relatively easy to satisfy. However, for some teachers, it appeared that it was difficult to relinquish the concept of 'language learner' in favour of that of 'language user'. One example was the Year 10 teacher of elementary learners of Japanese who had students select 'a boyfriend' from a picture sheet of 10 boys. In pairs a partner had to find out who their partner's boyfriend was and vice versa, which necessitated asking questions about appearance/physical characteristics in order to identify and eliminate possibilities. However, this teacher stipulated that each student needed to ask 10 questions even though they might have found the answer already. At some stage in each pair, therefore, when the 'boyfriend' had been successfully identified, it was obvious that learners would no longer be communicating as language users in order to bridge a communicative gap (thus not consistently respecting Ellis criterion two either) but that they would be functioning as language learners, in order to meet the teacher's requirement of '10 questions'.

In this study, all criteria were given equal weighting, however, Ellis (2009) identifies criteria one and four (focus on meaning, an outcome) as being those that are key for a task to be 'task-like' and the two most likely to differentiate a task from a situational grammar exercise. It is interesting and encouraging to note that these are the two criteria that the teachers in this study found easiest to respect in their task design. This is evidence that teachers were able to design activities that would place them more at the 'task' end of a continuum and that were more likely to promote a focus on meaning than on language forms.

1 Implications

As mentioned previously, the crucial impetus for this study, was that the researcher wanted to understand what changes might need to be made to the TPDL programme the participants were involved in, to help them better understand the notion of a language 'task', with the idea that this would be a necessary prerequisite to the successful

implementation of TBLT. The findings of this study have potential implications for other professional development programmes which aim to give teachers the skills to implement TBLT or a task-supported pedagogy in their teaching contexts.

Teachers, especially those who teach beginner/elementary learners, need to be helped to understand the importance of making sure that their learners will be able to meet the language demands of a task, perhaps by providing appropriate support and resources. Chan (2012) highlights the importance of scaffolding and claims that advance planning and sequencing is crucial in a task-based pedagogy. For the teachers in this programme an emphasis in their professional development on two of Nunan's seven principles (2004, p. 25) underpinning TBLT could be helpful. The first, 'Scaffolding', stresses the importance of providing support and of not requiring learners to produce language that has not previously been introduced to them prior to the task-based lesson sequence. Willis and Willis's (2007) notion of 'priming' could also be helpful here, an example of which is providing learners with vocabulary that might be of assistance in completing a task (as opposed to requiring students to use grammatical structures they have not previously been taught). Teachers may also need further clarification that 'own resources' refers to allowing students freedom in the language they can choose to complete a task, rather than specifying the use of particular language (Ellis, 2003).

The second of Nunan's principles that may be helpful is that of 'Task dependency', the requirement that a task should grow out of those that have preceded it. As part of this, an understanding of the receptive- to- productive principle, stressing the importance of, and modelling the use of input-providing as well as output-prompting tasks, might help teachers better sequence tasks in relation to student proficiency.

Another recommendation would be to ensure that teachers understand the difference between a 'communicative' gap and a language gap. In planning, it might be helpful to stress that the question 'what does a learner find out as a result of the communication that takes place?' (criterion two) is different to the question 'what language may the learner learn as a result of doing this task?' and that the answer to each would also be expected to be different. In planning for a 'gap' in the design of a language task, the teacher also needs to plan not only for the encoding, but also the decoding of messages. If the audience, or addressee, of a message is unable to decode it (maybe because of proficiency/comprehension issues) or is given no goal that would motivate him/her to want to engage with it, then it is possible that no gap will be closed.

Lastly, teachers in this programme would benefit from more concrete examples of the difference between having students function as language users and language learners. Samuda's (2007) concept of 'detasking' might be useful here, to demonstrate those junctures where a task no longer has learners engaging with meaning.

2 Limitations

One of the limitations of this research is that the data set was potentially a biased sample. If this were the case it is important not to overstate the effectiveness of the learning of the participants of this programme, but rather to endorse the modifications that have been suggested in the previous section. Teachers were asked to make their Learning Inquiry assignments available for the study after these had been marked and returned to them and

so it is therefore possible that the teachers who did better/ were more satisfied with their marks were motivated to contribute. Grades were available for 32 of the Learning Inquiry assignments in this data set and did show that those who performed better tended to participate. The average grade for all course participants was 70%, the average grade for those who agreed to participate in this study was 79%. It is important to realize that a more balanced data set may have produced results that were not as positive in terms of demonstrating that teachers were able to understand and design tasks. On the other hand the assignments were not marked according to task design so much as according to task evaluation, so that there is not necessarily any relationship between teachers' 'task as workplan' and the grade allocated to the assignment.

A further limitation, that has been referred to earlier, is that any research that looks at the task as workplan is limited in that it provides very little information about what happened in the language classroom. It is quite possible that teachers taught language tasks that fulfilled all four criteria in this study but which did not result in any significant language learning, whilst other teachers taught 'tasks' that did not meet the specified criteria but which led to significant language gains. Another issue was that at times participants did not provide as much information as would have been ideal about their task designs, this was particularly relevant, as has already been discussed, to the third criterion ('Learners should have to rely on their own resources'). In retrospect the researcher could have interviewed the participants of the study following the submission and marking of their assignments to allow for clarification and thus for greater reliability in coding of results.

The criteria against which the tasks the teachers designed in this study were evaluated were Ellis's (2005). These were chosen as they were the most often referred to during the course, being those against which the lecturer consistently evaluated the tasks she used with the teachers, and so, it was assumed, those that were most salient. However, it was not a requirement that the teachers had to design their tasks according to these criteria only, and it is worth considering to what extent the results of this study might have been different were other criteria used.

In the coding of tasks against the criteria used in the study, the researcher adopted a yes/no approach. In future research of this nature it could be worth considering to what extent it may be helpful to evaluate tasks along a continuum, as in Littlewood (2004), for example. This would also make it easy to see at what point an activity was no longer a 'task', something that this study did not address.

VI Conclusions

This study investigates how well teachers enrolled in a professional development programme were able to design tasks that fulfilled four criteria specified by Ellis (2003) as useful in differentiating a task from a language exercise, on the premise that adequate understanding of the construct of task underpins successful implementation of task-based or task-supported language teaching. Results show that over three quarters of teachers were able to design activities that were more like language tasks than like language exercises. The research context is one that has been under-represented in the

literature to date, that is, the foreign language classroom (i.e. languages other than English) in school settings with young language learners (primarily aged under 14 years).

The criterion that was most difficult for teachers to incorporate in task design, perhaps not surprisingly given the low level of proficiency of most of the students taught by the participants in this study, was the one that required students to rely on their own resources. Another criterion that caused some difficulty was the one that required the task to have a gap that could be closed by the communication taking place. Some teachers understood this to be a language knowledge gap rather than a communicative gap. The criterion that was easiest for teachers was the requirement that the task have an outcome. It was hypothesized that the teachers in this study were used to having to motivate language learners, as studying a language is usually a choice in New Zealand schools, and that, therefore, they found it easy to build in a goal that would entice the students to complete the task.

The article presents a range of suggestions for how Professional Development programmes that aim to upskill teachers to implement TBLT, or a task-supported approach to language teaching, may better help teachers understand and design language tasks. It also discusses the extent to which the criteria, against which the tasks in this study are judged, are unambiguous and accessible to the language teacher practitioner.

It is important to remember that this research provides very little data about how the tasks were completed and no information about any language learning that occurred when participants implemented their proposed workplans in their classrooms. Investigating the correspondence between the task as workplan and the task as process would be a fruitful direction for future research. Another possible area for future research would be to investigate teachers' evaluations of their proposed tasks, so as to get information about how teachers might have further progressed in and revised their understanding about tasks and TBLT.

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Notes

1. One teacher in the current study was teaching French in a tertiary context but was allowed to participate in the programme because the target enrolment quota had not been reached.
2. The teachers of Samoan and Tongan had some students in their classes who had been exposed to the language at home, but still considered their students as beginners. In some other classes, some students did have a background in the language being taught; for example, in some of

the Mandarin classes there were students who were recent immigrants from China or children of immigrants.

3. A number of tasks also had students working with input. These were mainly tasks where students were engaged in asking each other for information and where they of necessity had to attend to input as well as produce output.

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