

What task designers do

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This paper describes part of a research project which is concerned with the design procedures followed by those engaged in designing pedagogic tasks for use in classrooms. The project as a whole is at first briefly described. The paper then focuses on that part of the project which involves actual observation of designers in the process of developing one specific task for class use. Two groups of designers are observed, specialist designers and non-specialists. Findings are presented under three headings. The first, 'control procedures', relates to the overall design patterns followed by the subjects. On this level, significant differences between specialists and non-specialists are identified. Second, the 'design schemata' of the subjects – the knowledge and belief systems they bring to the activity – are identified, particularly as they relate to the way design is undertaken. On this level, two broad designer types emerge, called language-oriented, and task-oriented. The main concern of the former is to develop tasks with valuable language content, while the latter are more concerned with providing what they regard as interesting and meaningful activities. The third heading, 'heuristics', deals with how specific and detailed design problems are tackled. On this level, a number of characteristics are identified, some though not all relating to the specialist/non-specialist distinction. The paper concludes with some observations regarding the production of a *Task Design Guide*, which the project undertook as part of its aim.

I Introduction

1 Description of the project

The project, entitled 'Capturing expertise in task design for instruction and assessment' deals with two domains, the teaching of EFL and the teaching of mathematics.¹ Data collected in relation to the teaching of mathematics will not be discussed here.

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Part of the project involved comparing the processes of specialist designers (S designers hereafter) and non-specialist designers (NS designers). In order to count as an S designer, an individual had to have spent at least five years engaged in a major way in task design. All of the S designers in this study had in fact produced published sets of materials. The NS designers were (for the part of the study reported here) students following the MA in Linguistics for ELT course at Lancaster University. They were practising teachers, and hence have all had some task design experience, usually involving the adaptation of published teaching materials to suit their own teaching contexts. But none had full-time experience in task design. We intend eventually to add a further dimension to these notions of S and NS designer, by asking teachers and students to evaluate the actual tasks produced by our S and NS subjects. It is to be hoped that this will provide some independent measure of their expertise, based on the quality of their tasks, and not just on the amount of design experience they have accrued.

The project had three main stages. At the first, both S and NS designers were interviewed in order to find out their underlying beliefs about language teaching in general and tasks in particular. A large part of each interview was based around discussion and evaluation of a collection of language teaching tasks designed by us in advance. The collection is an attempt to represent some of the main task types currently found in language teaching. Stage 2 involved eight S designers and eight NS designers. These individuals were asked to undertake a task design activity under 'laboratory' conditions. Because this paper relates largely to this stage, the procedure is described in more detail below. The project's final stage involved the production of a *Task Design Guide* (Samuda *et al.*, forthcoming). This aims to provide research-supported guidance to all professionals in the field likely to be involved in the activity.

At stage 2, subjects were given a 'task design brief', asking them to design an activity which centred around the functional area of *describing people*. The design brief is given below as an Appendix. One major issue emerged in relation to production of the brief. On the one hand it was deemed necessary to provide a sufficiently detailed specification to make cross-designer comparisons possible. All designers could then be compared as they tackled the same set

of problems. On the other hand, we were aware that detailed specification might force designers in directions unnatural to them (and indeed one designer did complain that, left to his own resources, he 'would never have produced a *describing people* task'). At the piloting stage different briefs were tried out, providing either more or less detail than the final version, which is an attempt to compromise on this issue. Wherever possible, sessions took place in the Lancaster University Psychology Department's video laboratory. Sessions usually lasted about two hours.

Subjects were asked to verbalize as they designed the task. They were given some practice in concurrent verbalization beforehand. Some did experience the kinds of problems associated with the technique in the literature (e.g. Ericsson and Simon, 1993), particularly the difficulty of verbalization interfering with thought processes. But only one of the designers found the procedure so unnatural as to complain about it at length. Other less 'laboratory-oriented' and more natural modes of data collection were contemplated but for various reasons (largely of a practical nature) were not used in the event.

Data collected (on video and audio tape) were transcribed and coded using a specially devised system.² As might be expected, it was extremely difficult to develop a system that captured the kind of insights we were interested in, while at the same time excluding accurate but irrelevant information. After many attempts and countless revisions, the final system uses three category types, called *macro-operators*, *operators* and *referents*. The macro-operator level is intended to capture the major stages of the design process, and the categories were developed following initial readings of the transcripts specifically to identify broad outline. Macro-operators are often expressed as verbs and objects. Examples are as follows: *review brief*, where the designer goes back over the design brief to check some aspect of what is required; and *instantiate task*, where the designer begins to add details to a task outline once decided upon. Operators are usually verbs describing actions such as *monitor*, *compare*, *abandon*. Referents comprise a much larger set of what are characteristically noun phrases describing topics which interest us. To exemplify referents: one is called *cultural sensitivity*, under which fall all comments where

designers discuss characteristics of particular cultural groups. Several designers note, for example, that in many cultures there are great sensitivities associated with the description of a person's physical attributes. A second example referent is *language authenticity*, under which are coded all references by designers to the issue of ensuring that a task's language content is 'authentic'. Further examples of referents are given below (Section 3) in discussion of how we attempted to categorize types of task. Data were coded using Claris FileMaker Pro. The three category types were used to analyse aspects of the designers' thinking processes as they undertook the assigned design activity. The categories were used in combination with a framework of analysis which conceptualizes the design operation in terms of three parameters: control procedures, designer schemata, and heuristics. This framework is outlined in section II.

2 Expertise studies in applied linguistics

The study fits into a tradition of expertise studies in the applied linguistic area. Many such studies are concerned with learners and their strategies (e.g. O'Malley and Chamot, 1990). Others focus on teaching. Peck (1988) looks in detail at specific aspects of classroom teaching techniques. Woods (1996) develops a more principled framework, and although his major concern is with teacher beliefs and cognitions, he does discuss design procedures in some detail (in relation to the course planning process in particular). There are also teacher education and programme evaluation studies which touch on design procedures. Such procedures are hence covered in the applied linguistic literature; but the coverage is somewhat patchy, and there are a number of expertise areas that have not as yet been studied in depth. Task design is one such area; others are materials design (a larger-scale activity than task design), syllabus design, teacher education programme design, and the design of language teaching 'projects' (e.g. for the British Council or governmental agencies). One might expect design studies in these areas not just to contribute to our theoretical understanding of applied linguistic expertise, but also to have great potential practical use, particularly for the training of professionals in these fields. The research being described here

has both such theoretical and practical aims, and the resulting *Task Design Guide* is an attempt to utilize research findings to practical ends.

II Categorizing findings

The data collected for this study provide a wealth of detail, and there was a problem in finding a framework to present this detail coherently. We shall here consider examples of the project's findings under three headings, loosely based on the categories Schoenfeld (1985) uses in his study of mathematical problem solving. The first we call *control procedures*. These are what Schoenfeld (p. 15) describes as 'global decisions regarding selection and implementation of resources and strategies'. Their study (closely associated with our macro-operator level of analysis) provides information on the sequencing of designer events. The second category is here called *designer schemata*. This category deals with the knowledge and belief systems the designer brings to the design activity. It will include a view of language teaching, beliefs about classroom management, about student/teacher roles, task evaluation criteria, past task design experience, and so on. Of interest is the way all these factors exert influence on design procedures. The third category is called *heuristics*. These are 'local' strategies and techniques, concerned with the way specific issues and problems are tackled. Some of these will be 'domain-independent', as likely to occur in mathematics (or other domain) task design as in EFL, while others will be 'domain specific' (specific to language teaching task design). Each of these areas will now be looked at in turn.

III Control procedures

Identification of control procedures enables us to consider the ways in which designers sequence the major phases of the design process. There is much discussion in the design and problem-solving literatures on the decomposition strategies known as breadth-first (BF) and depth-first (DF). In the former, the designer works through a number of possibilities, before exploring any one in depth. The BF strategy has the advantage of avoiding premature

commitment, but the disadvantage of being heavy on cognitive load, since various possible solutions have to be kept in mind before commitment is made to one. DF strategies involve going deeply into one or a small number of possibilities from an early stage. The advantage is lightness of cognitive load, but there is the concomitant danger of commitment to one solution which might eventually prove itself inappropriate and have to be abandoned. In a paper describing part of the project being discussed here, Ormerod and Fritz (1998) cite examples of the view that BF is associated with S designers, DF with NS designers. Perez *et al.* (1995), for example, describe S and NS instructional designers who were designing lesson plans for teaching students to trouble-shoot a diesel engine simulator. They found that S designers showed greater adherence to breadth-first principles than NS designers, who typically designed in a depth-first manner. Others, however, find that S designers use a mixture of DF and BF, and some (particularly Ball and Ormerod, 1995) are of the opinion that such a mixture will be optimal. Among the reasons why an entirely BF strategy may be avoided are purely practical ones, such as that those overseeing the design process may become dissatisfied if too much time is spent looking at hypothetical alternatives, before evidence of in-depth planning (and 'progress') is provided.

As general strategies of problem solving, BF or DF procedures will be evident at many points during the design process. We shall here concentrate only on the main process of arriving at a final task, considering how the designers proceed from their start to that point at which they have identified the task that is to become their final choice. Subsidiary decisions – deciding for example whether plenary, groupwork or pairwork will be used at a particular point – will not be considered at all here. If we focus on this main process, it is the case that the NS designers in our study adopt predominantly DF strategies. Most commonly their approach is to alight very quickly on a task type which will serve their purpose. They then spend the major part of their time implementing this, as it were putting flesh onto their quickly chosen skeleton. Figure 1 illustrates this process. In it, and in Figure 2 which follows, the length of the thick vertical lines indicates the amount of time spent on each action. The numbers in the figures indicate the order in which the actions took place. Figure 1 shows that the designer

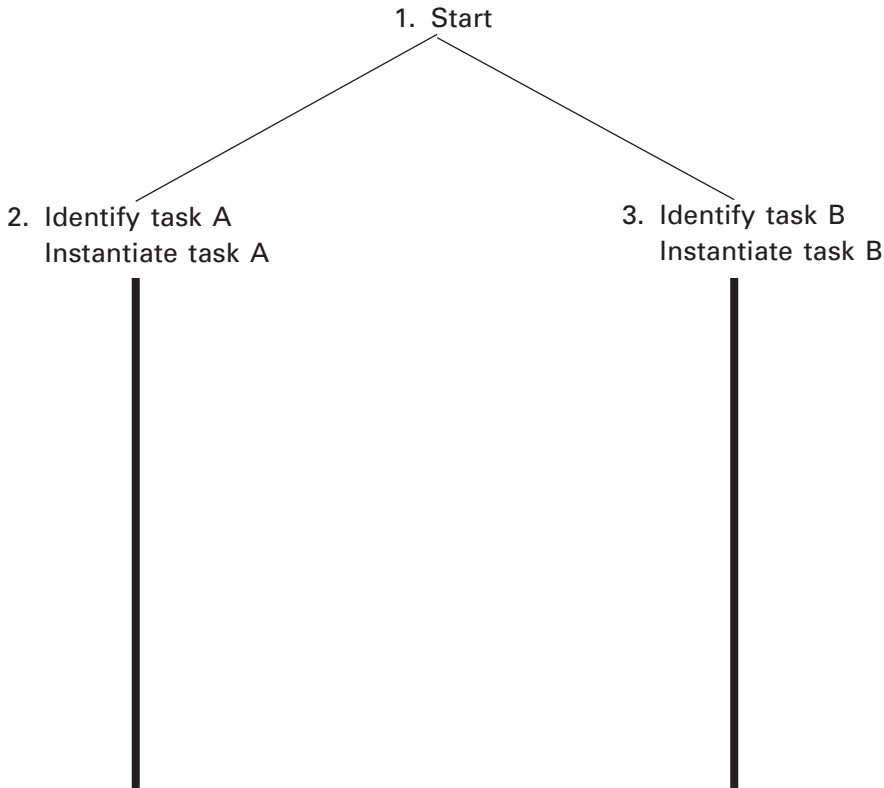


Figure 1 The design procedure of one non-specialist

begins by identifying a possible Task A, which she immediately instantiates to completion (action 2 taking roughly one hour). In fact, she was completely satisfied with this first task, and only produced a Task B because she was prompted by the researcher to do so.

The reason why a DF approach is followed is evident from observing the NS designers' protocols. Most of the time they are clearly adopting blueprints which they have used at some earlier point in their experience. The material comes from a repertoire that they hold in their memory. The design process involves searching through the repertoire to identify material suitable for the brief they have been given. We describe this process as *repertoire-driven*.

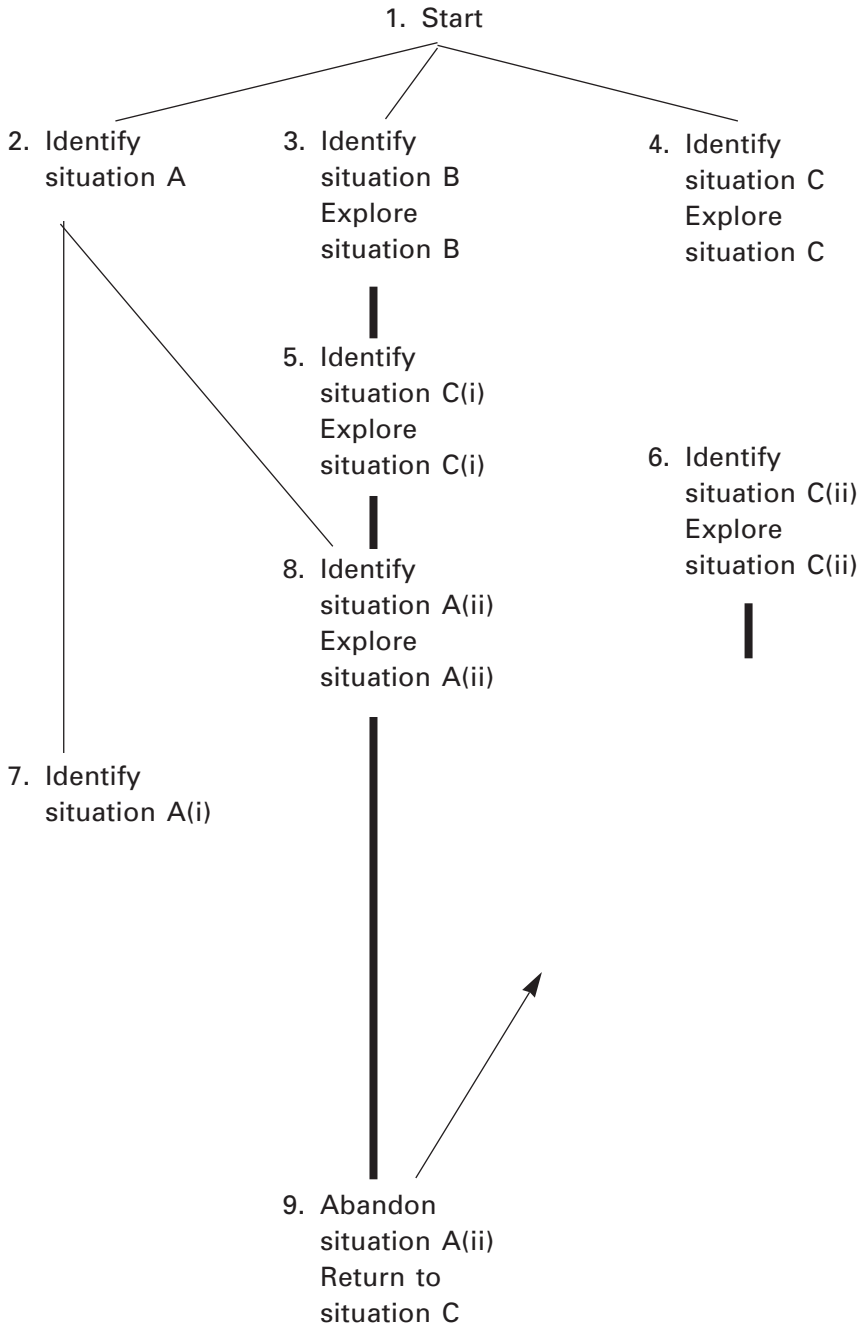


Figure 2 The design procedure of one specialist

Many of the S designers reveal BF characteristics. Figure 2 shows one such designer. She moves through a series of possible real-life situations – situations A, B and C, with some variants marked (i) and (ii). She spends a small and equal amount of time on situations B, C(i) and C(ii) before deciding to explore situation A(ii) in depth (action 8). It is also interesting to note about this designer that although she spends about an hour in exploring situation A(ii), she is able to abandon it at a certain point and to move on to explore another situation. Perhaps the ability to abandon a solution into which so much commitment has been put is a characteristic of S designers.

It may be that the difference between the repertoire-driven procedure shown in Figure 1, and the non-repertoire-driven nature of Figure 2 can be related (as Ormerod and Fritz, 1998, note) to a distinction made (by Lamberts and Pfeifer, 1992, and others) between routine and adaptive modes of expertise. The distinction is used by Holding and Reynolds (1982) to identify two types of chess expertise. Routine expertise is based upon recall of known positions, and adaptive expertise based upon evaluation of planned move alternatives.

But in fact the situation is more complex than the above description suggests. This is because some of the S designers in our study are also repertoire-driven, and adopt a DF strategy comparable to the one shown in Figure 1. It is therefore inaccurate, for these data, to generalize that NS designers use DF (exhibiting routine expertise) and S designers use BF (exhibiting adaptive expertise).

It is perhaps entirely to be expected that all designers should be repertoire-driven at some point in the design process, drawing on task types or actual tasks that they have used before. But our data show that there is a difference in exactly what S designers and NS designers hold in their repertoire, and hence in what they bring into play at the early stages of task design. In order to explicate we need first to consider some of the parameters which it has been necessary to introduce into the coding system as referents for the description of tasks. One parameter commonly used by designers is *task function*. It is possible to categorize tasks in terms of the central 'real-life' function that occurs within them. Examples might be *describing a picture*, *describing a known person*, and *describing*

a *non-present person*. These descriptors identify the real-life activity on which the task is based, and the speech act area involved. Some designers invest a great deal of energy in thinking about task functions. They consider at length who the interactants in their task will be, in what context they will be acting, what kinds of speech acts they will perform. They are concerned to ensure that those functions present in the task correspond to realistic and useful functions undertaken in real life.

But another common way designers use for categorizing tasks focuses more attention on their design characteristics than on the real-life functions they embody. This second parameter might be called *task genre*. Examples of descriptions marked by the task genre referent occur when an activity is described as being of an *information gap*, an *information transfer*, or a *jigsaw* type. These are common task types found in the field, and for many designers are powerful blueprints for task design; indeed, as we shall see below, these genres are sometimes the starting point for design. Usually the difference between a task function description and a task genre one is clear-cut, but this is not always the case. When activities are labelled *describe and draw* for example, one might argue that a function is being described. But the context may clarify that the label is in fact being used to refer to the conceptualization of a sequence of classroom activities that serves as a blueprint for task design.

A third distinguishable way of perceiving tasks is in terms of *task frame*. This referent views the task as a sequence of activities, characterized not in terms of one central design characteristic like *information gap*, but in terms of a cluster of characteristics. Predominant among these characteristics are: the nature of the configuration used (e.g. group work, pair work), the skill practised (speaking, writing, etc.), the timing involved (how long each activity within the task will last) and teacher roles (correcting, facilitating, etc.). As with the other two ways of conceptualizing tasks, *frame* is often used as the starting point for design. So early on in the process, a designer might decide that she is looking for – not a *describing strangers activity*, nor an *information gap* task – but one which (for example) involves group work, speaking, lasts 10 minutes and entails teacher correction.

It is characteristic of the data collected that the NS designers

utilize task frames as the starting point for design. As an example, consider how one NS designer proceeds. Having spent a few minutes reviewing the design brief (checking what is required of the task, what is known about the students, etc.), she immediately begins to plan the activity in terms of stages and their timings. Below is an extract from her protocol:

Now the activity if it is going to be no more than half an hour it's going to be important to have a feedback stage at the end so that might take at least 10 minutes of the time. 10 minutes feedback so that leaves 20 minutes for the rest of the class . . . So the different stages would be . . .

She then goes through each of the stages for her intended activity, focusing for each on timings, issues to do with language content (e.g. whether the language involved will be new to the students), teacher role, and configuration (group work, pair work, etc.).

It is noteworthy in the NS protocols how little attention is given at the early stages (and indeed at all) to either task function or task genre. The secondary importance given to such issues is evident in the following quotation from another NS designer:

yes I could sort of set the scene a bit and er er write something down, so it is going to be a role play and it is for intermediate level and maybe we could have them working in threes so one person could be the detective, we would have to review from them the types of questions that they would need to ask. And maybe this could be done before the task was set up.

Here the designer does make mention of functional aspects of the task (a detective is talked about, revealing that some thought is being given to a 'real-life' contextualization for the task). But this mention is almost incidental, the main focus being on the sequence of activities (scene setting followed by asking questions) and the configuration involved (group work).

A further related observation is that the NS designers spend more time at the beginning of their design process in talking about such matters as configuration and timing. S designers do not ignore such matters, but their discussion of them generally comes at a later stage, once the overall shape and content of the task has been established.

Why do NS designers use task frames as their starting points?

The answer almost certainly is that they have been trained to do just this. Their training courses will have taught them how to produce lesson plans, and what we have described as task frames may be viewed as lesson plans in miniature.

Those S designers who also work from repertoire have a quite different starting position. In their cases it is either task function, or more often task genre that comes from the repertoire. In both the following examples, the S designers are identifying task genres to work from:

Well, my thought there when I was reading it [the design brief] is that clearly some kind of task which involves the differential distribution of information as in a jigsaw activity um now that could be that different members of the class are given actual information or that they are given a framework within which they provide their own information and that they have an outcome which can only be reached by obtaining that information from each other so some kind of survey activity is one fairly obvious way of doing it.

This second quotation occurs early in another S designer's protocol, a very short time after he has reviewed the brief:

Are we talking about, for example, a gap, what do you call it an information gap activity where for example one person describes somebody to somebody else and they have to draw that person or find them in a picture of [*sic*] something like that or are we going to have something where people move around the room talking about somebody that they know or whatever it may be.

The conclusions we can reach are as follows:

- all NS designers use DF strategies;
- not all S designers use BF strategies;
- there is a difference between those S designers who use DF, and the NS ones (also using DF). Both are repertoire driven, but draw on different constructs within their repertoires.

What, if anything, is wrong with drawing on task frames, rather than on actual tasks or genres? The answer is not obvious. In all cases one is dealing with repertoire-led material, so it is not that using task frames is any less 'creative', or more 'routine'. It might be argued that the parameters involved in task frame (the ones mentioned have been configuration, skill involved, timing, teacher role) are less 'central to a task's nature' than function or genre. A

task that is well-wrought in terms of these variables would form part of a 'balanced' lesson, which had the right mix of plenary, group and pair work, covered the four skills in a proportioned way, and so on. But it would not necessarily have had much thought put into it in terms of how well it covers the language function, or draws its technique from an interesting genre.

IV Designer schemata

Designers bring different knowledge and belief systems to the design activity, and it is of interest to observe how aspects of their knowledge and beliefs are reflected in the design process. As already mentioned, at stage 1 of the project, S and NS designers were interviewed to ascertain their beliefs about language teaching. One of the findings at that stage was that there is a basic grounding of similarity, a shared basis, to all the designers in the study. All associate themselves in various ways with so-called 'communicative language teaching', and claim that they strive to be 'communicative' teachers. It follows from this that all are likely to have been trained in a similar way, will have read the same background books, have been exposed to the same ideas, and to an extent share the same preoccupations.

But it is to be expected that within this general pattern, there should be differences between designers. By far the greatest that occurs within the S designer interviews is between *language-oriented* and *task-oriented* designers. One designer who well exemplifies the first category spends a good part of her time (in the stage 2 design process) looking at the linguistic output associated both with the real-life *describing people* situations she identifies, and with the tasks she contemplates developing. She shows great concern, that is, with the language content of her task. In the stage 1 interview it is not surprising that she (along with other language-oriented designers) should spend time talking about the issue of marrying task-based teaching and structural practice. For her and those like her, the nature of the linguistic content in both communicative language teaching and task-based teaching is a major issue. Designers falling into the second category clearly regard linguistic content as a secondary issue, and are likely to design tasks where the language to be used is either unspecified,

or in some cases only tenuously related to the *describing people* function that the brief specifies. For task-oriented designers, the production of an interesting, motivating, meaningful task is paramount. In the most extreme case of this in our data, the S designer does not mention language content at all as he designs, but gives all his attention to squeezing an element of people description into various task genre types and procedures that he regards as meaningful.

As the above suggests, these orientations manifest themselves in terms of the amount of attention paid to language or activity genre concerns. They are also manifested in starting points. The language-oriented designers characteristically start design by identifying real-life *describing people* situations and their language output. They then sift through these to find one suitable for pedagogic exploitation. The task-oriented designer starts by looking for activities that are engaging and motivating, and then seeks ways of fitting the *describing people* function into one of these.

V Heuristics

The study of heuristics offers insights into the strategies designers adopt to tackle local problems. The data provide a huge amount of detailed information on task design processes, and discussion of these here has to be selective. Four areas are focused on below.

1 *Repertoires as short cuts*

Language-oriented S designers often refer to the procedure just mentioned (identifying real-life situations and output, then seeking pedagogic exploitation), and say that they intend to follow it. Here is one S designer speaking just one minute after he has read and reviewed the brief:

[I] may just think of a setting, a scenario of some sort where, where describing people is going to be a necessary or a plausible thing to do erm. I think that's the starting point to try and find some, some context where, where describing people is going to be necessary erm.

Some designers not only refer to this procedure, but also follow it. That is, they do in fact begin by identifying real-life situations, exploring their linguistic output and seeking tasks to reflect these.

In some cases, this is the main strategy for task design. In the most extreme example, one S designer spends about a third of her total design time identifying real-life situations and exploring the language associated with them. One may note in passing that NS designers almost never give anything like the same amount of thought to real-life situations and their language output.

Although S designers may acknowledge the value of starting with real-life situations and their language output (and may explicitly make mention of this), it is interesting to observe that a significant minority (three out of the eight S designers) do not in fact carry this through. These individuals recognize the procedure as sensible, but it is not what they do. The S designer just quoted above is a case in point. Having said that he will look for real-life situations, his very next sentence reveals that he has in his repertoire a task that can be imported wholesale (which is in fact what he does):

Yeh I'm actually thinking back and thinking through to some of the stuff that I've done and some material I just wrote. I had some people meeting, meeting visitors at an airport and instead of having to have the people they were going to meet described to them erm yeh, that was quite good, though I'm not quite sure how we'd do that with 15 to 20 . . .

What seems to be happening with these designers is that they have a clear conceptualization of the procedure that needs to be gone through, but in fact a short-cut becomes apparent to them, in the form of a ready-made task in their repertoire.

2 Simulating language output

A further related characteristic of all the S designers is that they spend a considerable amount of time exploring the linguistic output of tasks, and verbalizing this in their protocols. We have coded this procedure as the operator + referent *simulate language output*. Here is one S designer simulating language output for one stage of his task:

OK so I've got, so far I'm happy um, good things have happened and um students have chatted away saying she's stout, no she isn't. She's middle aged, no I don't think she's middle aged. I think she's young. She's got long hair, well not very long hair. She's wearing boots, no she was wearing shoes and you're doing all that, that's good to start from, they're using all the vocabulary

that I've taught them and they're running through the two or three structures that I fed in the day before yesterday so we've got, that's all done . . .

In the case of language-oriented designers, this procedure acts as a check that the task's linguistic output is comparable to the supposed linguistic output of real-life situations. But all S designers, including the task-oriented ones, simulate language output, and one may speculate that its value goes beyond 'linguistic checking'. A procedure that many designers, S and NS alike, recognize as useful is trying out, or rehearsing, tasks before classroom use. Simulating language output may be seen as small-scale rehearsal, allowing the designer to identify the possible problems or outcomes a task may entail. Indeed it is often the case that task modification will result from a simulation of output. The data abound with examples. In one, an S designer sets up a group-work stage to a task. But when he undertakes a 'simulate language output' he discovers that the time required to do the stage is far too long, and he ends up dropping the stage altogether. On other occasions simulations of this sort lead creatively into new directions for a task. The instances of 'simulate language output' for S designers far outweigh those of NS designers.

3 Teachers' notes (Tnotes)

Another powerful tool for new task ideas comes through writing Tnotes. One might suppose that a designer's attention turns to Tnotes late in the design process, after the outline of a task has been decided on. This is sometimes the case, but some S designers use writing of the Tnotes as a way of exploring the feasibility of a task. Indeed, a candidate task might get dropped through some detail becoming apparent in the Tnotes design process. Here are two different S designers making this point:

Now I'm just writing out instructions for doing this as I would write them out for a teacher and um hoping that this will um show up any weak links or things that aren't, things that wouldn't work.

And another designer:

It's amazing how writing teachers' notes helps to clarify thinking.

Task design is indeed an activity where 'the devil is in the detail', and some designers deliberately engage themselves in detail early

in the process, in order that devils should be smoked out at the earliest possible opportunity. This engagement in detail may be achieved by early attention to Tnotes.

4 Authenticity

The question of authenticity raises its head in many of the protocols, particularly of the S designers. The applied linguistic literature on authenticity recognizes that there are different levels of authenticity (in Breen, 1985, for example). Hence one may speak of language authenticity, interactional authenticity (where the interaction patterns used in a task are authentic to what might be used in real-life situations), task authenticity, and others. All these types of authenticity make an appearance in the protocols, and we have sought to differentiate them in our referent codings.

S designers are realistic about authenticity. That is, they recognize that complete authenticity on all levels cannot be achieved in a pedagogically satisfactory way. A number of them show awareness that trade-offs in authenticity on different levels are essential. One S designer for example makes a decision (rightly or wrongly) that dialogue rather than monologue person descriptions are more common in real life; that is, we tend to describe people in question and answer interactions rather than in extended monologue. But in spite of this view he goes on to explore the possibility of a game involving monologue. He then finds that the actual language he expects to be generated in this monologue game is in fact pragmatically and structurally appropriate. So he stays with the monologue format. In so doing, he is consciously and willingly sacrificing 'interactional authenticity' (which suggests the use of dialogue instead of monologue) for 'language authenticity'.

Sometimes dramatic inauthenticity on one level is accepted if there is felt to be a pay-off on another level. The following example concerns what might be called *experiential authenticity*, referring to the realism of a situation in terms of a learner's life experience. The example comes from the stage 1 interviews (where designers were asked about their language teaching beliefs). Designers were asked to identify a common task type they particularly *disliked*. One S designer replied:

... you put learners in pairs and you give them each a piece of paper. One of the learners has a piece of paper which tells him or her that he or she has got to make a journey with certain constraints, going to certain places at certain times. The other learner has a railway time table. The railway timetable is – the journey let's say is between London and Manchester – the 2 learners are sitting in Zagreb and here are these 2 people sitting in Zagreb pretending the journey between London and Manchester. I mean, and what's awful about that, about an awful lot of tasks – is that the imaginary situation that they're put in is some – one that doesn't relate at all ...

Later in the same interview the designer was asked to identify a task he particularly *liked*. The reply:

Yeah ... it works like this: assuming you've got a class of um say 12 ... you say to them – Alright you lot are passengers on a train on the Trans-Siberian railway – or something like that – sort of 2 week train journey – you've already been on the train a day and a half and nobody's spoken yet in this carriage and you've already read all your magazines and the rest of it and so time to start talking – so a little conversation grows up – and um you leave them to it and somebody will think of something to say and somebody else will think of something to say and um the conversation actually does grow up in this role situation but as travellers on a railway train they can talk about anything whatever ...

The similarities between these two exercises are striking. Both involve imaginary train journeys that the learners are unlikely to make. In this sense both are equally experientially inauthentic. Indeed in the case of the first, it is this characteristic that renders the exercise unacceptable to the designer. But though the second exercise shares this experiential inauthenticity, it clearly has redeeming features that make it not just acceptable to the designer, but his example of a good exercise. One might speculate that these redeeming features are to do with the fact that the exercise, though put in a 'fantasy' setting, relate to the common experience of trying to strike up a conversation on a train. Whatever the case, the example seems to indicate that the designer is prepared, rather dramatically, to abandon his concerns regarding one type of authenticity if he sees other advantages to the exercise.

VI Conclusion

There are a number of ways in which this research project is of interest. Theoretically, by providing insights into the workings of

specialist and non-specialist task designers, it widens the domains of application of the concept of expertise within an applied linguistic context. In addition, it opens the way to an exploration of the relationship between the design process and learner perceptions of tasks.

The research also provided rich and detailed information which formed a good research basis for the production of our *Task Design Guide*. A major issue in the production of this document was to establish ways in which task designers can and cannot be helped. Some matters clearly cannot be treated prescriptively. For example, it would be inappropriate (as well as a waste of time) to attempt to alter a designer's views about what constitutes good language teaching. Nevertheless, the data provide plenty of information of potential use to would-be designers. Our overall strategy has been to utilize the data to offer material for discussion, illustration and evaluation, rather than prescription. The data pervade the *Guide*. One large section of it is entitled 'What designers do'. This is almost entirely based on the findings of the project and contains sub-sections dealing with such issues as 'moving from idea to task', 'specifying timing', 'writing rubrics and guidelines'. In this section, and indeed in the *Guide* as a whole, the views and procedures of both S and NS designers are extensively cited. As regards evaluation, the *describing people* tasks designed by both Ss and NSs are reproduced in the *Guide* for that purpose. We certainly feel that not only does the data provide a research basis for the study of task design, but also that they can be made to play a useful facilitative role in the development of task designers.

Notes

- ¹ The project, entitled 'Capturing expertise in task design for instruction and assessment', was funded by the ESRC as part of their Cognitive Engineering Initiative (grant No. L127251031). Apart from myself, the researchers on the project were the following: James Ridgway (School of Education, University of Durham); Tom Ormerod and Catherine Fritz (Department of Psychology, Lancaster University); Virginia Samuda (Department of Linguistics and Modern English Language, Lancaster University). I acknowledge the part played by these individuals in the research reported here, though opinions expressed

are not necessarily communal ones. Thanks are due to *Language Teaching Research*'s reviewers, who provided valuable comments on a draft of this paper; also to the Guest Editor, Martin Bygate, for his useful advice.

- ² This system was loosely based on the one described in Ball *et al.* (1997), used for engineers designing integrated circuits.

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Appendix

The design brief

Designers were given a piece of paper carrying the following instructions for task design:

You are asked to imagine that you have been teaching, or writing materials for, an adult monolingual group of learners at intermediate level. The group is studying a general English course in their own country. They meet for a two-hour class once a week. There are approximately 15–20 learners in the class.

In recent lessons you have been dealing with the general functional area of *describing people*. This has included coverage of simple descriptive statements of the *He/she is very tall/short* sort, but also more complex descriptions of character as well as physical appearance.

You now wish to give your learners a ‘communicative’ activity to practise this area further. You want the learners to interact as much as possible, with as many different members of the class as possible involved. Although reading and writing may be involved, you are most concerned to provide opportunities for speaking skills. You want the activity to last roughly between 15 and 30 minutes.

The materials you produce are to be used in the next day or so, and your activity needs to be worked out in sufficient detail for this to happen. This should include preparation of any worksheets. It would also be useful for us if you were to prepare clear written instructions on how to use the activity. If you are a teacher, you might imagine these instructions to be for a colleague who is to teach the activity. If you are a materials writer, the instructions might take the form of Teachers’ Notes.