# Task-Based Language Education

## From theory to practice

Edited by

## Kris Van den Branden

Task-Based Language Education:
From Theory To Practice

# THE CAMBRIDGE APPLIED LINGUISTICS SERIES

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## *Kris Van den Branden*

*The Editor and all contributors are from the Centre for Language and Education, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven*

# Contents

# Acknowledgements

# Series Editors' Preface

While an important and immensely costly undertaking worldwide, relatively little language teaching occurs in coherently designed programmes grounded in theory and research; in most cases, what goes on in classrooms is largely determined by whichever textbook happens to have been adopted or imposed. *Task-Based Language Education: From Theory to Practice* provides an example of what is possible when coherent design is achieved, implemented and evaluated, and not just in a few atypical classrooms. As one of the external reviewers of the original manuscript wrote, 'the scale and scope of this work is astonishing – this is not a small-scale, idiosyncratic, hyper-specialized "language pedagogy for the select few" that is being described; rather it is massive, mainstream, large-scale language education.'

Led by Professor Kris Van den Branden and his research team at the Centre for Language and Education at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has now been employed for roughly a decade in approximately 1,200 state schools and other educational settings throughout the Flemish-speaking region of Belgium. The settings include college-level Dutch/Flemish as a second language and international Dutch as a foreign language courses, adult vocational training, classes for immigrant children, and primary and secondary mainstream education. The Belgian achievement is especially notable because educational innovations of any sort are notoriously difficult to accomplish, and especially so when the new programme entails a radical departure from the status quo, as is the case with TBLT.

This latest volume in the *Cambridge Applied Linguistics Series* describes the multifaceted project and reports the findings. The book includes coverage of TBLT's principles, needs analysis, programme design, pedagogic task design, TBLT with young learners, extensions of TBLT into other (non-language) fields, computer-assisted TBLT, task-based classroom lessons, task-based assessment, and implications for teaching and teacher education. It should be of interest to a wide range of readers interested in modern second and foreign language teaching, programme design, the diffusion of innovation in education, and, of course, in TBLT, itself.

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Michael H. Long
Jack C. Richards

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# 1 Introduction: Task-based language teaching in a nutshell

Kris Van den Branden

## 1 Introduction

For the past 20 years, task-based language teaching (TBLT) has attracted the attention of second language acquisition (SLA) researchers, curriculum developers, educationalists, teacher trainers and language teachers worldwide. To a great extent, the introduction of TBLT into the world of language education has been a 'top-down' process. The term was coined, and the concept developed, by SLA researchers and language educators, largely in reaction to empirical accounts of teacher-dominated, form-oriented second language classroom practice (Long & Norris, 2000). In their seminal writings, Long (1985) and Prabhu (1987), among others, supported an approach to language education in which students are given functional tasks that invite them to focus primarily on meaning exchange and to use language for real-world, non-linguistic purposes. Twenty years later, we have reached the stage where volumes that synthesize what we know about how TBLT can promote language learning are being published (Bygate *et al.*, 2001; Ellis, 2003; Lee, 2000; Nunan, 2005).

However, much of the research concerning TBLT has been conducted under laboratory conditions or in tightly controlled settings. Furthermore, most of the research has been psycholinguistic in nature, inspired by a desire to elaborate our knowledge of how people acquire a second language. In SLA research, tasks have been widely used as vehicles to elicit language production, interaction, negotiation of meaning, processing of input and focus on form, all of which are believed to foster second language acquisition. Far less empirical research has been carried out where tasks have been used as the basic units for the organization of educational activities in intact language classrooms. This leaves us with the crucial question: does TBLT work for teachers and learners in the classroom as well as it does for SLA researchers? Further, is TBLT more than a fascinating pedagogical approach that looks good and convincing on paper? Can it really inspire language teachers when they prepare their lessons or

does it only frighten them because of the high demands it places on them and on their learners? Is TBLT compatible with prevailing classroom practices, with teachers' and learners' subjective beliefs of what makes good language education? How, for instance, does a teacher who has been using a traditional 'Focus-on-form' approach for 15 years react to TBLT? How do learners react to the idea of no longer having the particulars of grammar spelled out before being confronted with a speaking task? Does TBLT work as well for children as for adults? Can it be implemented in classes of 25 students with a wide range of cultural backgrounds and different levels of language proficiency? And how does one write a task-based syllabus covering six years of primary school? How, in the latter case, does the syllabus developer select, order and sequence some 720 tasks?

These are some of the many questions that are raised in this volume. In this introductory chapter, I will first summarize the rationale behind task-based language teaching. In the second part of this chapter, I will describe how this volume is organized and how each of the chapters contributes to answering the above-mentioned questions with regard to the implementation of TBLT in the second language classroom.

## 2  Task-based language teaching: general principles

When it comes to designing a second language curriculum (defined here as an educational programme describing what is to be taught to, and/or what should be learnt by, a particular group of learners), or a second language syllabus (i.e. a collection of tasks or activities aimed to assist the teacher in organizing classroom activity), there are three basic questions that need to be answered:

1  What particular language learning goals need to be reached by the learner?
2  How can educational activities be designed and organized in order to stimulate and support learners into reaching these language learning goals?
3  How will the students' learning processes and outcomes be assessed and followed up?

At the most general level, the answer to the first question, which refers to *what* is to be taught, will be basically the same for most courses that are currently being designed. Ultimately, all modern language courses aim to develop learners' ability to use the target language in real communication. However, this overarching goal needs to be broken down into more concrete and operational goals

that can guide the design of the different components of a curriculum or syllabus, down to the level of separate lesson activities. At this more practical level, vast differences emerge. A key distinction can be made between curricula/syllabuses that formulate lower-level goals in terms of linguistic content (i.e. elements of the linguistic system to be acquired) and curricula/syllabuses that formulate lower-level goals in terms of language use (i.e. the specific kinds of things that people will need be able to do with the target language). Task-based curricula/ syllabuses belong to the second category: they formulate operational language learning goals not so much in terms of which particular words or grammar rules the learners will need to acquire, but rather in terms of the purposes for which people are learning a language i.e. the tasks that learners will need to be able to perform.

But what, then, is a task? In the literature, various definitions have been offered that differ quite widely in scope and formulation (for overviews see Bygate *et al.*, 2001; Ellis, 2003; Johnson, 2003; Kumaravadivelu, 1993; Shehadeh, 2005), up to a point where almost anything related to educational activity can now be called a 'task'. Clearly, in order to prevent the literature base on tasks and task-based language learning becoming even more fuzzy and over-whelming than it already has become, clear definitions of what authors mean when they use the word 'task' are necessary.

Some of the differences in the available definitions arise from the fact that, as a concept, the word 'task' can be used for different purposes (Bygate *et al.*, 2001): in terms of the three basic questions guiding curriculum/syllabus design that I raised above, most of the available definitions apply to the second question primarily, and some even exclusively – what should educational activities look like in order to enhance language learning? I will discuss these below. If we focus on the first question which is concerned with establishing language learning goals, only a limited number of definitions are relevant. The definitions of 'task' that are most informative in this respect are listed in Table 1 overleaf.

The definitions in Table 1 have much in common. They emphasize that tasks are activities ('things people do') and that these activities are goal-directed. Since we are dealing with language learning in this volume, some reference to language also needs to be included in our definition. This we find in the definitions proposed by Bachman & Palmer (1996) and Bygate *et al.* (2001), who stress that even though the goal that the learner aims to achieve need not be linguistic (e.g. painting a fence), the task necessitates language use for its perform-ance. In other words, painting a fence becomes a *language* task if it cannot be performed without some use of language (e.g. under-

*Table 1*    Definitions of 'task' as language learning goals

| Author | Definition |
|---|---|
| Long (1985) | A piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward. Thus examples of tasks include painting a fence, dressing a child, filling out a form .... In other words, by 'task' is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play, and in between. 'Tasks' are the things people will tell you they do if you ask them and they are not applied linguists. |
| Crookes (1986) | A piece of work or activity, usually with a specified objective, undertaken as part of an educational course, at work, or used to elicit data for research. |
| Carroll (1993) | Any activity in which a person engages, given an appropriate setting, in order to achieve a specifiable class of objectives. |
| Bachman & Palmer (1996) | An activity that involves individuals in using language for the purpose of achieving a particular goal or objective in a particular situation. |
| Bygate *et al.* (2001) | An activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective. |

standing instructions given by a partner, reading the instructions on the paint pot). This leads to the definition below, one we will use throughout this volume when referring to tasks as language learning goals:

> A task is an activity in which a person engages in order to attain an objective, and which necessitates the use of language.

According to this definition, using language is a means to an end: by understanding language input and by producing language output i.e. by interacting with other people in real-life situations through the use of language, the goals that the learner has in mind can be (better) achieved. Defining the language learning goals of a curriculum/ syllabus, then, is basically a matter of describing the tasks the language learner needs to be able to perform and of describing the kind of language use that the performance of these tasks necessitates.

The second question that we raised above refers to *how* language learners can be stimulated and supported in order to develop the functional language proficiency they need to be able to perform

target tasks. Since we are focusing on instructed second language acquisition in this volume, this brings us to the question of how educational activities for the second language classroom should be designed, sequenced and organized in order to facilitate second language learning. The key distinction we made earlier between a more 'linguistic' approach and a 'task-based' one applies equally here (Crookes & Gass, 1993; Long, 1985; Long & Crookes, 1992; Long & Norris, 2000). In linguistic, otherwise-called 'synthetic' (Wilkins, 1976) or 'Type A' (White, 1988) syllabuses, the basic units of analysis are elements of the linguistic system (sounds, morphemes, grammar rules, words and collocations, notions, functions): different pre-digested and preselected parts of the language are taught separately and step by step in a predetermined order, so that acquisition is regarded as a process of gradual accumulation of small pieces. In their seminal articles on task-based language teaching, Long and Crookes (1992, 1993) discuss a number of negative effects of a synthetic approach. First, as a direct result of the fact that the language the learner is exposed to is controlled from a purely linguistic perspective, 'linguistic' syllabuses are full of artificial and stilted language. Secondly, according to the same authors, this approach assumes a model of language acquisition that conflicts with SLA research and with what we know about language learning. For instance, research shows that people do not learn isolated items in L2 one at a time, in an additive, linear fashion, but rather as parts of complex mappings of form–function relationships. Furthermore, linguistic syllabuses often call for immediate target-like mastery of the 'form of the day', while SLA research shows that learners rarely move from zero to target-like mastery of new items in one step. In sum, linguistic syllabuses rely too much on the equation 'what is taught is what is learnt' (Prabhu, 1984, 1987), an equation that SLA research has proven to be simplistic.

In sharp contrast, task-based syllabuses do not chop up language into small pieces, but take holistic, functional and communicative 'tasks', rather than any specific linguistic item, as the basic unit for the design of educational activity:

> It is claimed, rather, that (pedagogic) tasks provide a vehicle for the presentation of appropriate target language samples to learners – input which they will inevitably reshape via application of general cognitive processing capacities – and for the delivery of comprehension and production opportunities of negotiable difficulty. New form–function relationships in the target language are perceived by the learner as a

result. The strengthening of the subset of those that are not destabilized by negative feedback, their increased accessibility and incorporation in more intricate associations in long-term memory, complexifies the grammar and constitutes SL development.                    (Long & Crookes, 1993: 39).

From a task-based perspective then, people not only learn language *in order to* make functional use of it, but also *by* making functional use of it (Van den Branden & Van Avermaet, 1995): if, for example, teachers aim to stimulate their learners' ability to understand and give road instructions, they should confront them with functional tasks in which the students are asked to produce and understand road instructions. As such, the traditional distinction between *syllabus* i.e. what is to be taught, and *methodology* i.e. how to teach, is blurred in TBLT because the same unit of analysis (task) is used (Long, 1985).

In Table 2, a number of definitions are listed that describe the key features of tasks as the basic unit for educational activity. Most of the definitions that were listed in Table 1 also apply here.

A number of the definitions in Table 2 emphasize or suggest that there should be a close link between the tasks performed by learners in the language classroom and in the outside world. The things learners do with the target language in the classroom (i.e. the classroom tasks) should be related to, or derived from, what the learners are supposed to be able to do with the target language in the real world (target tasks). In this respect, a preliminary needs analysis for establishing course content in terms of the real-world target tasks that learners need to be able to perform constitutes a necessary step in designing a TBLT curriculum or syllabus (Long & Crookes, 1993; Long & Norris, 2000; Long, 2005a). The above-mentioned definitions, however, remain vague on the exact relationship between target tasks and classroom tasks. Should classroom tasks be true copies of the target tasks or rather increasingly complex approximations to the target tasks (Long, 1985), or should (as Ellis's definition suggests) classroom tasks only result in a kind of language use that resembles that in the outside world, leaving open the option that pedagogic tasks differ in content from real-world target tasks? This, clearly, is one of the questions to which different responses are possible and which this volume will need to address.

Regarding the kind of language use that classroom tasks should give rise to, most of the definitions in Table 2 emphasize the primacy of meaning: the learner's attention should primarily be directed towards meaning exchange. Classroom tasks should facilitate

*Table 2*   Definitions of 'task' as an educational activity

| Author | Definition |
|---|---|
| Richards, Platt & Weber (1985) | An activity or action which is carried out as the result of processing or understanding language i.e. as a response. For example, drawing a map while listening to a tape, and listening to an instruction and performing a command, may be referred to as tasks. Tasks may or may not involve the production of language. A task usually requires the teacher to specify what will be regarded as successful completion of the task. The use of a variety of different kinds of tasks in language teaching is said to make teaching more communicative . . . since it provides a purpose for classroom activity which goes beyond practice of language for its own sake. |
| Krahnke (1987) | The defining characteristic of task-based content is that it uses activities that the learners have to do for non-instructional purposes outside the classroom as opportunities for language learning. Tasks are distinct from other activities to the degree that they have non-instructional purposes. |
| Breen (1987) | Any structured language learning endeavour which has a particular objective, appropriate content, a specified working procedure, and a range of outcomes for those who undertake the task. 'Task' is therefore assumed to refer to a range of workplans which have the overall purpose of facilitating language learning from the simple and brief exercise type, to more complex and lengthy activities such as group problem-solving or simulations and decision-making. |
| Prabhu (1987) | An activity which required learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought and which allowed teachers to control and regulate that process was regarded as a task. |
| Candlin (1987) | One of a set of differentiated, sequencable, problem-posing activities involving learners' cognitive and communicative procedures applied to existing and new knowledge in the collective exploration and pursuance of foreseen or emergent goals within a social milieu. |
| Nunan (1989) | A piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is primarily focused on meaning rather than form. |

| Willis (1996) | Activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome. |
|---|---|
| Skehan (1998) | An activity in which:<br>• meaning is primary<br>• there is some communication problem to solve<br>• there is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities<br>• task completion has some priority<br>• the assessment of the task is in terms of outcome. |
| Lee (2000) | (1) A classroom activity or exercise that has: (a) an objective obtainable only by the interaction among participants, (b) a mechanism for structuring and sequencing interaction, and (c) a focus on meaning exchange; (2) a language learning endeavor that requires learners to comprehend, manipulate, and/or produce the target language as they perform some set of workplans. |
| Bygate *et al.* (2001) | An activity, susceptible to brief or extended pedagogic intervention, which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective. |
| Bygate *et al.* (2001) | An activity, influenced by learner choice, and susceptible to learner reinterpretation, which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective. |
| Ellis (2003) | A workplan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate prepositional content has been conveyed. To this end, it requires them to give primary attention to meaning and to make use of their own linguistic resources, although the design of the task may predispose them to choose particular forms. A task is intended to result in language use that bears a resemblance, direct or indirect, to the way language is used in the real world. Like other language activities, a task can engage productive or receptive, and oral or written skills, and also various cognitive processes. |

meaningful interaction and offer the learner ample opportunity to process meaningful input and produce meaningful output in order to reach relevant and obtainable goals. In other words, tasks invite the learner to act primarily as a language *user*, and not as a language

*learner.* Tasks are supposed to elicit the kinds of communicative behaviour (such as the negotiation for meaning) that naturally arises from performing real-life language tasks, because these are believed to foster language acquisition. Some of the definitions in Table 2 further point to the fact that the meaningful use of language should be regarded as a complex skill, which demands from the learners that they draw on their linguistic resources as well as their general cognitive resources. Since language use is facilitative of reaching all kinds of goals in the real world, task-based language teaching naturally evokes a wide diversity of cognitive operations that people need to perform in order to function in real life. As a result, in a task-based approach, the cognitive demands placed on the learner will be one of the factors determining task complexity (Robinson, 2001b).

For all its focus on meaning, task-based language teaching does not exclude a focus on form. In fact, according to some authors (Skehan, 1998; Long & Norris, 2000), the marriage of meaning and form constitutes one of the key features of TBLT.

> Task-based language teaching ... is an attempt to harness the benefits of a focus on meaning via adoption of an *analytic* syllabus, while simultaneously, through use of *focus on form* (not forms), to deal with its known shortcomings, particularly rate of development and incompleteness where grammatical accuracy is concerned.     (Long & Norris, 2000: 599)

A number of arguments supporting the combination of focus on meaning and form can be inferred from the definitions in Table 2. Since the meaningful use of language will necessarily imply the establishment of relevant form–meaning mappings, the learner will need to manipulate and thus pay at least some (conscious or unconscious) attention to form. According to some authors (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Ellis, 2003; Long, 1998; Long and Norris, 2000; Skehan, 1998), task designers should manipulate tasks in such a way as to enhance the probability that language learners will pay attention to particular aspects of the language code in the context of a meaningful activity, because this is believed to strongly promote second language acquisition. More recent SLA research has corroborated these findings (DeKeyser, 2006; Doughty & Williams, 1998; Ellis, 2002; Long, 1991; Norris & Ortega, 2000; Robinson, 2001b; Samuda, 2001; Swain & Lapkin, 2001). As a result, much of the recent literature on task-based language teaching explores how focus on form can optimally be integrated into task-based classroom work and discusses whether this should be accomplished implicitly or explicitly, during task performance, before or after it, and so on.

Nevertheless, many authors of the definitions in Table 2 stress the fact that tasks are merely workplans for mental activity (see also Breen, 1987; Murphy, 2003). Task designers can ask, demand or invite the learner to do meaningful things with language and meanwhile pay attention to particular forms, but they cannot force the learner into anything. The gap between the 'task as workplan' and the actual 'task in process' (Breen, 1987) can be wide. As a result, the desirable combination of focus on form and meaningful activity will often be the result of the interactional activity among learners, or between the teacher and the learners, as much as the result of careful construction and manipulation by task designers.

This applies equally to another feature of classroom tasks as set out in the definitions in Table 2 i.e. the emphasis on learner activity. Learners are set to work in task-based language teaching. They are asked or invited to reach certain goals and to make functional use of language in order to do so. In line with social-constructivist views on learning in general (Kaufman, 2004; Steffe & Gale, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978), language learning is regarded as:

a  an 'active' process that can only be successful if the learner invests intensive mental energy in task performance;
b  an 'interactive' process that can be enhanced by interaction with other learners and/or with the teacher.

In view of the above, it should come as no surprise that task-based language teaching has often been contrasted with language teaching methodologies in which the teacher takes up a dominant role, whether with regard to selecting, sequencing and presenting course content, regulating classroom interaction, evaluating task performance or other aspects of educational activity. In task-based language teaching, the learner takes up the central role: he is given a fair share of freedom and responsibility when it comes to negotiating course content, choosing linguistic forms from his own linguistic repertoire during task performance, discussing various options for task performance and evaluating task outcomes (Benson, 2001; Breen & Candlin, 1980; Nunan, 1988; Shohamy, 2001). Again, all this emphasizes that in the process of task design, the manipulation of task features in order to achieve particular outcomes should not be regarded in absolute terms. In the same vein, in TBLT, the teacher's main role shifts to motivating learners to engage in natural communicative behaviour, supporting them as they try to perform tasks and evaluating the process of task performance as much as the eventual outcome (Dörnyei, 2002; Freeman & Richards, 1996; Richard-Amato, 2003; Samuda, 2001).

This brings us to the third basic question guiding curriculum design: how will the students' learning processes and outcomes be assessed and followed up? Generally speaking, assessment in education is concerned with establishing whether learning goals are achieved by the learners and with accumulating quantitative and qualitative data on the progress made by learners, and on the impact of the learning environment on this development (Norris, 2002; 2005). On the basis of the data that are accumulated through assessment, appropriate actions and decisions can then be taken. If, in line with the above, language education is ultimately geared towards fostering learners' ability to communicate in the target language, assessment should be primarily concerned with evaluating learners' communicative proficiency in the target language. Rather than asking students to demonstrate knowledge of the L2, task-based tests should ascertain whether learners can use the L2 to accomplish target tasks (Long & Norris, 2000). Again, however, wide differences come to the surface when this general principle is made operational. According to Long and Crookes (1992: 45), assessment of student learning in TBLT should be organized 'by way of task-based criterion-referenced tests, whose focus is whether or not students can perform some task to criterion, as established by experts in the field, not their ability to complete discrete-point grammar items.'

In other words, in order to assess their functional language proficiency and the progress they have made, language learners should be set meaningful tasks that elicit natural language use. As such, task-based tests, especially those in which the learner is given target tasks, fall under Baker's (1989) headings of *performance-referenced tests* (as they are based on an assessment of the learner's actual performance in a language use situation) and *direct tests* (as test performance is very closely related to criterion performance). In comparison with system-referenced tests that measure whether language learners have acquired knowledge of particular aspects of the language system (e.g. grammar rules), task-based tests are supposed to have many benefits, including positive backwash effects on education (i.e. by stimulating the use of real-world communicative tasks in instruction as much as in assessment) and the potential to offer more accurate assessments of students' abilities to use language in real-world situations (Brown *et al.*, 2002; Norris *et al.*, 1998).

Task-based assessment, however, involves much more than setting the learners functional tasks (Skehan, 2001). In the first instance, test performance has to be rated, raising the question of what 'performance to criterion' actually means. The tension between a linguistic

perspective and a real-world perspective, which we have already touched upon in our discussion of target tasks (goals) and classroom tasks (educational activities), also applies here. Those who endorse a more linguistic perspective in the assessment of task performance will emphasize that the learner needs to comprehend or produce particular linguistic forms (words, rules, etc.) in order to 'pass the task-based test'. On the other hand, those who endorse a real-world perspective will focus primarily on whether the task was successfully performed – on the real-world outcomes (e.g. was the cake cooked? Did the waiter bring the drinks the testee had to order?). Especially with regard to tests that require language output, the selection of concrete parameters on the rating scale may give rise to difficult choices. In fact, this is only one of the many challenges that developers of task-based tests face. Other challenges include the selection of test tasks that allow for valid and reliable test scores, problems with extrapolating from test performance to real-world performance and across tasks, and increased cost and logistical problems (Bachman, 2002; McNamara, 1995; Messick, 1994; Norris *et al.*, 1998). Many of these challenges have only recently been taken up by researchers, as the field of task-based testing is still very young. Whereas the 'task' has been used by SLA researchers and L2 teachers as a basic unit of analysis for over two decades, L2 testers have only recently begun to use the term and to conduct research in the task-based area.

In sum, in task-based language teaching, the 'task' is used as the basic unit of analysis at the levels of goals ('syllabus'), educational activities ('methodology') and assessment. At these three levels, 'task-based' refers to the fact that:

- the attainment goals of a second language course are, first and foremost, derived from an analysis of why people are learning the second language and what functional things they want/need to use it for ('target tasks');
- learners will acquire the language proficiency to perform these target tasks, first and foremost, by being asked and motivated to try and perform these, or similar, tasks ('pedagogical tasks') and being interactionally supported while doing so;
- the most direct way to evaluate the learners' language proficiency is to assess the extent to which they are able to perform the target tasks or, for the same matter, intermediate tasks ('assessment tasks').

# 3  About this volume

This volume will take up many of the issues raised in the paragraph above, especially the ones that syllabus developers, teacher trainers, language teachers and testers will have to deal with in the process of bringing task-based language education to life in the classroom. The different chapters of this volume address issues related, among others, to the selection of goals and needs analysis, grading and sequencing tasks, the design of task-based classroom activities, the setting up and stimulation of the kind of interaction in the classroom that will maximally foster language acquisition, the role of the teacher in TBLT and the development of tools for task-based assessment. This volume aims to offer a unique contribution to the expanding literature base on TBLT by combining a discussion of task-based pedagogical principles with descriptions of actual applications of task-based language teaching in response to language education problems.

The aim of this volume is to provide a practice-based and research-based account of the many challenges and practical obstacles that the implementation of task-based language education raises and to discuss the potential of different options to overcome these obstacles. 'Practice-based' here refers to the fact that the first concern of the authors is not with the theoretical rationale of task-based language teaching, but with what TBLT means for the above-mentioned agents in the educational field who want to work 'the task-based way'. 'Research-based' refers to the fact that this volume aims to compile a body of empirical research that supports the authors' claims. Some of the research that is referred to in this volume has already been published in international journals, yet a substantial body of research will be new to the reader. This is especially true of the Flemish research that is included in this volume.

For the past 15 years, Flanders, the northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, has offered a large-scale test case for the implementation of task-based language education: from 1990 onwards, TBLT was introduced into the education of Dutch as a first and second language in primary, secondary and adult education, through the development of task-based syllabuses and extensive teacher training programmes. The implementation of TBLT in Flemish education was accompanied by empirical research conducted by researchers of the Centre for Language and Education at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Van den Branden, 2005).

The introduction of task-based language teaching in Flanders was part of a nationwide, government-subsidized policy combating social

inequity in Flemish education and society. One of the main target populations of this policy were adult non-native speakers of Dutch, mainly immigrant workers and refugees coming to Flanders from the 1960s onwards, who were found to be overrepresented in unemployment statistics and who, it was claimed, integrate into Flemish society only to a limited extent. Likewise, attention was given primarily to the immigrants' children, who were born in Flanders but who were found to underachieve dramatically in Flemish compulsory education (from 6 to 18 years), which uses Dutch as the sole medium of instruction.

One of the major pillars of the Educational Priority Policy issued by the Flemish government from 1990 onwards was the enhancement of the quality of Dutch language education in primary and secondary education and in courses of Dutch as a second language for adult immigrants and newcomers. By catering for higher-quality language education, pupils-at-risk in compulsory education and adult immigrants were believed to be offered better chances to develop the Dutch language proficiency they needed to be more successful in education, to have better chances of successfully rounding off vocational training and functioning on the labour market, and to integrate in Flemish society. The Centre for Language and Education at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven was assigned the task, by the government, to inspire language teaching institutes and official schools in designing and implementing these high-quality educational programmes. With its emphasis on needs analysis, primacy of functional, meaningful tasks and its link to real-world objectives, the task-based language teaching approach appeared to have much potential, particularly in view of the fact that language education in Flanders until then basically made use of a teacher-dominated, audiolingual methodology, which in the eyes of many teachers, policy makers and educationalists did not adequately respond to the immigrants' language learning needs. From the early 1990s, a cycle of action and reflection was set up, accompanying the introduction of task-based syllabuses and the training of teachers at the various levels of education. Working together with several hundred school teams, educational counsellors, policy makers and educationalists, the Centre for Language and Education supported the implementation of task-based language teaching in Flemish education, step by step, carefully monitoring the reactions of all the parties involved and redressing its implementation strategies when necessary. Much of the empirical research accompanying this process will be reported in the different chapters of this volume.

More specifically, Chapters 2–4 of this volume deal with some of

the fundamental questions that task-based designers will need to answer. In Chapter 2, Van Avermaet and Gysen discuss how the goals of a task-based curriculum can be derived from an analysis of learners' needs. The authors tackle intricate issues such as what exactly constitutes a task, how target tasks can be described so as to yield clear, valid and relevant descriptions of curriculum goals and to what extent task-based curricula are compatible with programmes striving for general language proficiency. Chapter 3, by Duran and Ramaut, describes how task-based syllabuses can be designed so as to promote early second language acquisition (at beginner level) and how the complexity of tasks can be gradually manipulated so as to ensure that language learners will be confronted with challenging tasks just above their level of proficiency throughout the different stages of their interlanguage development. This chapter, then, addresses the issues of sequencing and grading. Chapter 4, by Van Gorp and Bogaert, reviews and illustrates the essential features of tasks that are claimed to facilitate language learning and describes how language lessons can be constructed around such tasks.

As can be inferred, Chapters 2 to 4 primarily focus on curriculum and syllabus design. These chapters treat 'language teaching' as a separate subject in the curriculum. However, in real life and in education, the boundaries between disciplines, fields and subjects are not always as strict as in the literature of educational research. Because of its emphasis on using language for real-life purposes, task-based language teaching and learning is bound to interfere with the teaching and learning of other skills and knowledge. Chapters 5 and 6 discuss two of these transfer issues. In Chapter 5, Bogaert, Van Gorp, Bultynck, Lanssens and Depauw discuss to what extent the principles of task-based language teaching can be transferred to the teaching of other subjects, for instance science education in primary and secondary education, and vocational training in adult education. In this chapter, the extent to which task-based language teaching can be integrated with the teaching of other skills and knowledge is explored. Chapter 6, by Schrooten, presents an account of research into the potential of TBLT for multimedia and ICT applications and describes the basic principles underlying the development of task-based ICT-materials fostering second language learning.

Chapter 7, by Colpin and Gysen, discusses the development of task-based language assessment tools. The authors describe how task-based tests can be developed and what reactions the intro-duction of these tests evoke when teachers are confronted with them.

The final three chapters in the volume (Chapters 8 to 10) focus on the teacher, who plays a crucial role in realizing the potential of tasks

in the language classroom. Chapter 8, by Van Avermaet, Colpin, Van Gorp, Bogaert, and Van den Branden, and Chapter 9, by Verhelst, describe how teachers can support their students, both cognitively and affectively, while performing tasks in order to enhance language learning. The authors stress that tasks do not foster language learning by themselves: it is the interaction between learners, and between learners and the teacher, that tasks gives rise to, and the language processing learners engage in, that will ultimately decide what language will be learnt. At a certain point in the educational process, the teacher will need to take over from the task in order to realize the activity's full potential. Taking up this role is no easy task for many teachers: they find themselves confronted with many questions, doubts and worries. In Chapter 10, Van den Branden explores how teachers can be supported in adopting TBLT in their classrooms and thereby creating powerful language learning environments. This chapter also reports empirical research studies that were conducted in order to establish the effect of teacher training efforts.

This book does not claim to answer all pertinent questions relating to the implementation of task-based language education, nor will it provide definitive answers. 'Practice-based' and 'research-based' do not always go well together when it comes to implementing educational innovations. Many decisions, such as how to sequence tasks in a syllabus or how to train teachers to adopt TBLT in their classroom practice have to be taken before sound empirical research substantiating these decisions is available. Many decisions have to be taken on the basis of expert intuition, literature studies and lively discussions between the many parties involved, rather than on the basis of empirical evidence. The different chapters in this volume not only offer a number of valuable lessons and insights that can be drawn from the massive, mainstream implementation of task-based language teaching in Flanders, but also point to a number of areas where our knowledge of what tasks can do to people, and what people can do with tasks, is still limited.

# 2 From needs to tasks: Language learning needs in a task-based approach

Piet Van Avermaet and Sara Gysen

In this chapter, we will focus on tasks as attainment goals (see also Chapter 1 in this volume). Determining and describing target tasks may be regarded as the first step in the process of task-based curriculum design (Long, 1985, 1997, 2005a; Richards, 2001). In describing target tasks for language education and evaluation, a balance will need to be struck between theoretical principles and practicability. What can be argued for theoretically may not always be realizable in real-life language education or assessment. How to deal with practicalities in applying the task-based approach to the description of target tasks will therefore be one of the key issues dealt with in this chapter.

## 1  Language learning needs from a societal perspective

When it comes to curriculum design for second language education, two basic questions are usually asked by teachers and syllabus designers: '*What* should language learners learn?' and '*How* can language learners be stimulated to learn whatever they are supposed to learn?' A third question which may be equally important from the learners' point of view, but which is very often overlooked except in the field of language education for specific purposes, is: '*Why*?'

Why do so many people all over the world go through the trouble of enrolling in second language courses, buying dictionaries and grammars, spending hours practising grammar rules, experimenting with new sounds and new words, acquiring new orthographic systems and taking nerve-racking exams? In many language educational approaches, this question is hardly ever asked, and if it is, the answer tends to be restricted to something as vague as 'to become a proficient user' or 'to acquire knowledge of the target language'. Such statements give the impression that for the majority of people, language learning is a reward in its own right. More often than not, however, this is not the case (Paulston, 1994). Most people learn second, third and fourth languages because these languages can be of

particular use to them, and because, if they fail to acquire them, they may not reach certain goals that they have in mind.

The exploration of learners' language learning needs is often circumvented. Even if it is explicitly acknowledged that individuals may have proper learning needs in mind, an analysis of *what* has to be learnt in order to speak and understand the target language is what seems to be needed the most. Whether it be notions or functions, vocabulary or grammar, language learning needs are not conceived of as essentially functional or societally-based, but are primarily seen as linguistic. Even in some interpretations of task-based or task-supported language teaching (cf. Ellis, 2003), 'tasks' are first of all seen as referring to the kinds of classroom activities that will enable the language learner to acquire particular elements of the target language (see also Chapter 1 in this volume).

'Task', however, may also stand for the kinds of activities that learners want to or have to be able to do with the new language they are acquiring. In this interpretation, a task-based approach attempts to take learners' language learning needs as the starting point and interprets them first and foremost as the answer to the question 'why?' The answer to this question will, by definition, yield non-linguistic answers. As illustrated by many needs analyses conducted at the Centre for Language and Education (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven), with regard to the acquisition of Dutch as a second language by adult non-native speakers (e.g. De Groof, 2000; Schuurmans, 1994; Wijnants, 2000), people learn a new language for a variety of reasons, e.g. because they want to raise their chances of finding a proper job, because they want to function more efficiently at work, because they want to get better acquainted with their neighbours or because they want to read certain books, articles or magazines.

Focusing on language learning needs invariably involves accommodating variation in terms of course content: task-based approaches acknowledge that not all learners need to learn the same things, but that many, if not all, have their own objectives. Therefore we need to design courses where attainment goals match the language learning needs of particular groups of learners, and where different curricula and courses are developed for groups with different needs profiles.

In multilingual societies, the choice of a needs-based approach may have consequences not only for the teacher and the curriculum designer, but also for policy making at a broader societal level (Brecht & Rivers, 2005; Cooper, 1989; Fishman, 1991; Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997). If the goals of official language courses are described in terms of the particular tasks that non-native speakers aim to perform in particular language use situations and domains, this may

have a positive impact on national and regional policies for language education. Further, policies supporting task-based teaching will contribute to building a society in which many languages and language varieties are accepted and recognized (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1995; Spolsky, 2004). Educational policy makers who allow for needs-based curricula thereby implicitly acknowledge the right of minority language speakers to use their various mother tongues in certain situations, while at the same time encouraging them to use the L2 in others. They award speakers of minority languages a greater degree of freedom as regards their day-to-day choice of language. Similarly, task-based descriptions of language learning goals have the capacity to implicitly or explicitly underscore the richness of language variation and diversity in multilingual societies.

## 2  Describing needs

In the previous paragraph, language learning was described as a goal-directed activity, serving the broader goal of enhanced functioning in society. However, such a general description is too vague to guide task-based curriculum design. A first step towards refining this description is to distinguish between the broad domains in which the second language learner aims to function in society. For instance, the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment* (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001), which was designed by the Council of Europe in order to enhance cross-cultural and international communication about foreign/second language learning, education and testing, distinguishes four broad domains of language use: the personal, public, occupational and educational. This remains a very coarse-grained categorization (Humblet & Van Avermaet, 1995) as the four domains mentioned are such broad categories covering a range of situations for language use and a wide variety of tasks. In addition, choosing four broad generic domains in international frameworks such as the CEFR may pay insufficient heed to regional variation: is functioning in the public domain of Flemish society using Dutch as a second language exactly the same as functioning in the public domain in Portugal using Portuguese?

Empirical research into the language learning needs of particular groups of learners or individuals (e.g. Bartlett, 2005; Kellerman *et al.*, 2005; Lett, 2005; Richards, 2001; Van Avermaet *et al.*, 2004) reveals that needs are learner- or group-specific, that they are tied to local contexts and may change over time. On the other hand, if needs research is supposed to guide curriculum design and goals, such

diversity needs to be controlled so as to remain workable. Listing individual learner needs may be theoretically sustainable, but in most parts of the world language education has to be organized to suit large groups in order to remain affordable and practicable. This naturally implies that the seemingly infinite diversity of individuals' language learning needs will have to be reclustered into a workable number of needs profiles.

## 2.1 Subjective and objective needs

Who should provide the information on language learners' needs in order to compose relevant profiles is a fundamental issue. Until the 1970s, language learning needs were usually determined by language teachers and educationalists. From the 1970s onwards, language learning needs were re-interpreted: learners were not seen primarily as customers, but as individuals who had their own personal views on their language learning needs and on their personal development in general. Richterich (1972), and afterwards Van Ek (1975), Wilkins (1976), Munby (1978), and Brindley (1984a,b) contributed to the classification of language learning needs along learner-based lines.

Many of these authors made a distinction between subjective and objective needs. Objective needs can be deduced by parties other than the learners themselves, from an analysis of the learners' personal characteristics, their choices regarding language use, their level of language proficiency, etc. For instance, a young non-native speaker who is unemployed and looking for a job can be expected to have a need for the kind of language that helps him on the job market. He will probably have to be able to understand job advertisements, consult the multimedia job bank on the internet, write an application letter and so on. Subjective needs are based on the learner's own statements. They do not necessarily coincide with objective needs. For instance, empirical research shows that functioning efficiently in social situations of a formal nature, such as filling in forms for the municipal board or communicating with bank managers is seldom formulated as an explicit language learning need by second language learners (De Groof, 2000; Schuurmans, 1994; Wijnants, 2000), yet their teachers claim that students regularly ask to help them with these kinds of tasks. Similarly, learners may signal subjective needs that are not acknowledged from an 'objective' point of view. Subjective needs may not only pertain to the goals learners have in mind when using a second language, but also to 'what' and 'how' they want to learn it. Language learners do not always distinguish

between needs related to targets and needs related to learning styles and pedagogical approaches (Hutchinson & Waters, 1986). For instance, many second language learners have a clearly defined need for acquiring the 'grammar' of a language, for this matches their view of what efficient language education should look like (Depauw, 2000). Such perceptions are often based on their own, or others', previous language educational experiences: learners' expectations of language teaching are based on their individual past experiences. Nunan (1988) illustrates how strongly learners' perceptions of their pedagogical needs may differ from those of their teachers. Figure 1 summarizes teachers' and students' assessments of the relevance of some classroom activities:

| Classroom activity | student | teacher |
|---|---|---|
| articulation exercises | + + + | + / − |
| lockstep education | + + + | + + |
| conversation practice | + + + | + + + |
| correcting errors | + + + | − |
| vocabulary training | + + + | + + |
| working with cassettes | − | + |
| discovering own mistakes | − | + + + |
| using photos and movies | − | − |
| pair work | − | + + + |

**Figure 1**   Teachers' and students' assessment of the relevance of certain classroom activities for second language learning (Nunan, 1988: 92)

Figure 1 shows that students interpret the more traditional, teacher-dominated activities more positively than less traditional ones. The teachers show a more balanced view.

   In curriculum design objective and subjective language learning needs have to be balanced. Blindly following subjective needs formulated by the learners themselves, without paying heed to their objective needs, may not be in the long-term interests of the learners. Second language learners do not always have a clear idea of the linguistic demands of certain domains such as the workplace, the social domain or tourism (Auerbach, 1995; Long, 2005b). This may be particularly true of second language learners with a low level of education who have a relatively limited knowledge of the Western world (Plichart, 2003). On the other hand, an exclusive emphasis on objective needs may not be ideal either. If second language learners feel that what they are learning is not relevant to their linguistic

needs in the outside world, they may become demotivated and even drop out of their courses (cf. Berben, 2003).

We will now describe needs analyses that were carried out on the acquisition of Dutch as a second language (DSL). These illustrate how subjective and objective needs can establish and describe curriculum goals. It must be stressed, however, that these examples are not intended as prototypes. As Long (2005b) has convincingly argued, there are many different ways of conducting second language needs analyses. In fact, for practical, financial and organizational reasons, most of the examples given below do not live up to all of Long's standards for second language needs analysis (e.g. stratified random sampling, use of multiple sources and use of multiple methods), yet they have inspired Flemish curriculum and course designers in tuning their courses of Dutch as a second language to the functional language learning needs of the students involved. Some of the examples given below focus on adult education, while others focus on primary education.

## 2.2 Establishing relevant domains and situations for language use

About 40 years ago, the teaching of DSL in Flanders (the northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) was confined to courses addressing French-speaking students (French being the second major official language of Belgium). Today, the number of people who want to learn Dutch in Flanders has grown so spectacularly that the demand for courses of Dutch as a second language exceeds the number of courses that are organized. European unification, leading to a greater mobility and exchange of workforce, the waves of migration from Northern Africa (e.g. Morocco, Algeria) and Turkey, as a result of the economic reconstruction of Europe after the Second World War, and the recent influx of political refugees have strongly raised the societal, economic and social value of learning new languages all over Europe. In Flanders the demand for more courses in Dutch had arisen for two reasons: first, because the majority group of native speakers in Flanders want to communicate with non-native speakers (NNS) of Dutch and expect NNSs and their children (most of whom would like to integrate into Flemish society) to learn Dutch. Secondly, the NNSs themselves have specific language learning needs. Curriculum design of DSL courses, then, should take both needs into account.

In 1993, the Centre for Language and Education (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven) conducted empirical research, subsidized by the

Flemish Ministry of Education, into DSL learning needs of adult non-native speakers in Flanders (Schuurmans, 1994; Humblet & Van Avermaet, 1995). The DSL schools for adult education strongly supported the research, because until then they had based their curriculum design on their own pedagogical intuitions. This had resulted in a strong tendency to offer courses aiming for 'general Dutch proficiency'. At a Round Table Conference in 1993, where all Flemish institutions offering DSL courses were represented, the need for coordination was strongly formulated: some courses (such as basic language proficiency courses) were organized in the same region by many different institutions, while at the same time other courses at higher levels, or courses aiming to reach a particular target group or specific attainment targets, were not organized at all.

Two other factors added to the felt urgency for needs research. First, the societal context in which DSL courses for adult learners were embedded had changed drastically during the 1980s: post-war migration had changed from a temporary phenomenon (migrant workers staying in Flanders for a number of years and then returning home) to a permanent one (migrant workers deciding to stay and build a life in Flanders together with their families). Many migrants felt a need to learn Dutch that they had not felt before. As a result, their language learning needs diversified. Secondly, at the beginning of the 1990s, a number of players in the educational field (inspectors, policy makers, syllabus developers) started to emphasize that for adult second language learners, learning Dutch was a functional endeavour. Courses in DSL were explicitly expected to prepare NNSs to function well in the domains and language use situations that were relevant to their needs.

The needs research conducted by the Centre for Language and Education started from the following three research questions:

1 In what situations, requiring the use of Dutch, do adult NNSs in Flanders need to be able to function? To answer this question, a number of informants were interviewed:
- NNS students taking a DSL course at the time they were interviewed ($n = 56$);
- NNSs living in Flanders who were not following a DSL course or who had dropped it ($n = 50$);
- Experts involved with the organization of DSL courses ($n = 17$);
- Native speakers (NS) of Dutch who, through their profession, had frequent contact with NNSs (e.g. doctors, police officers, shop personnel) ($n = 30$);
- Other native speakers ($n = 300$);

2  How predominant is each of the above-mentioned situations (or cluster of situations)? To answer this question, 200 NNSs were asked to select one course of Dutch from a diverse menu of 20 courses, each focusing on different clusters of language use situations.
3  What should adult NNSs be able to do with the Dutch language in order to function efficiently in these situations? This question required a detailed qualitative analysis of the above-mentioned language use situations in terms of the linguistic demands they posed.

The interviews with NSs revealed that they experienced a great need to communicate with NNSs. Almost 50% of the NS respondents believed that organizing DSL courses was the best solution to solving problems regarding the integration of NNSs into Flemish society. Concurrently, NSs' expectations of the level of language proficiency the NNSs should reach were relatively low. Native speakers showed a strong tolerance with regard to the linguistic quality and accuracy of NNSs' language use. The research showed that NSs were quite satisfied when NNSs at least tried to express themselves in Dutch, even if their language was full of formal errors (Humblet & Van Avermaet, 1995). In other words, Flemish NSs did not expect NNSs to perform highly in terms of formal correctness, nor did they expect them to acquire Dutch to a near-native level. Their expectations of NNSs' Dutch language use emphasized the importance of functionality in their efforts (communicative adequacy is more important than formal correctness) and its symbolic value ('NNSs should try' (to make the effort to learn Dutch)). These low expectations however, did not match the relatively high expectations of formal correctness that were raised by teachers of DSL courses. As such, this research, based on interviewing stakeholders, supported a functional basis of DSL courses, involving the need for curriculum design to match societal needs and emphasizing task performance rather than linguistic knowledge.

The NNSs were surveyed through the use of two questionnaires (one open-ended questionnaire and one with closed questions). In the closed questionnaire, a list of language use situations was presented. The informants were asked to tick the situations in which they wanted or were expected to function, and which required the use of Dutch by them. In the open-ended questionnaire, the informants were given the opportunity to list freely those situations and domains of language use that were relevant to them. The quantitative and qualitative analyses of these questionnaires revealed that five needs

domains were particularly relevant for DSL courses for adult NNSs in Flanders:

a  work/business
b  education/training
c  informal social contacts
d  formal social contacts
e  children's education.

More domains could be distinguished, but these pertained to smaller groups of learners. Most of these latter domains were also more specific subdomains of the five above-mentioned domains (e.g. for domain a: DSL for nurses; for b: DSL for lawyers and magistrates). As can be inferred, the overlap with the generic domains distinguished by the CEFR is considerable, but not complete. Further, apart from the distinction between informal and formal social contacts that the CEFR does not make, the fifth domain (children's education) is markedly different. It was mothers among the NNSs who expressed the desire to learn the kind of Dutch that would enable them to support and monitor their children's education in a Dutch-medium school and to communicate with the headteachers and the teachers about their children's performance and behaviour at school.

Each of these five domains was further described in terms of the language use situations, requiring the use of Dutch, they typically involve. This was done by key-informants and stakeholders within each of the domains. Figure 2 (taken from Vienne, 2004) exemplifies a number of language use situations that are typical for the fifth domain (education of children):

| Domain | Typical language use situations |
|---|---|
| Education of children | • enrolment of a new pupil in a school <br> • informative meetings organized by the school for parents <br> • inform school about sickness of the child |

**Figure 2**  Example of language use situations derived from the domain 'Dutch as a second language related to children's education in Flanders'

Language use situations are defined here as situations that typically require the smooth and comfortable use of language for all parties involved. In this needs research, the inventory was narrowed down to the situations that require the use of Dutch.

Establishing relevant domains and language use situations was also the first step in another needs research carried out by the Centre for Language and Education at the end of the 1990s. In 1999, the centre was subsidized by the Dutch Language Union (Nederlandse Taalunie) to design a new set of official exams for Dutch as a Foreign Language (Certificaat Nederlands als Vreemde Taal (CNaVT): Certificate of Dutch as a Foreign Language). Again, this analysis focused on adult learners. The test developers opted for a task-based approach to the development of these exams, focusing on the direct relationship between the language performance that is assessed and the language use situations, requiring the use of Dutch, in which the examinees eventually aim to function.

In this project, the Centre for Language and Education conducted a needs analysis among a sample of foreign language learners of Dutch who aimed to get certificates (Van Avermaet *et al.*, 2004; Gysen & Van Avermaet, 2005). A written questionnaire was sent to a random sample of students all over the world ($n = 700$) and to teachers of Dutch as a foreign language (DFL) ($n = 800$). A part of the questionnaire consisted of a list of domains that could be of potential relevance to future test takers (e.g. following law studies in a Dutch-speaking country; living in Flanders or the Netherlands). The respondents were free to add domains themselves. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of a non-exhaustive list of 30 language use situations, which had been compiled by consulting key informants who had been involved in the field of Dutch foreign language teaching (e.g. policy makers, former teachers, former assessment developers) for a long time. The students and the teachers were asked to rate the importance of each domain and language use situation on a three-point scale.

Data analyses revealed that the second part of the questionnaire yielded the results that were most useful to analyse and interpret. Factor analyses of the teacher data pointed to the predominance of four domains: 'business contacts', 'social contacts', 'study' and 'tourism'. Factor analyses of the student data yielded the same domains, with one exception: the student data lumped social and touristic contacts together. These research results were then presented to a group of experts and key-informants in the field of teaching DFL (headteachers, language experts, members of the advisory board of the project and assessment experts). They were asked to reflect on the data and to advise the test developers in order to establish certification of domains and language use situations that were most relevant for substantial groups of learners of Dutch as well as for stakeholders in society.

On the basis of the needs analysis and the experts' input, four needs profiles, corresponding to the domains in question, were selected:

a  academic language proficiency
b  professional language proficiency
c  societal language proficiency
d  informal/tourist language proficiency.

Together, the two above-mentioned studies illustrate the first steps in the needs research we conducted: lists of potentially relevant domains and language use situations were presented to a sample of stakeholders, including the learners involved and other relevant parties. From these lists, the most crucial domains and language use situations were selected. These domains may, in a first phase, be quite generic, but may also be more specific, depending on the context and the target population. In some cases, conducting a needs analysis is not even a prerequisite for determining relevant domains. This is, for instance, the case when the language use domain is clearly definable in advance and very narrow in scope (e.g. an institute organizing a DSL course for nurses, or developing a language test for Belgian magistrates).

In a second phase, the list of selected domains and language use situations was presented to experts in the field, who were asked to refine and complete the list. In this second phase, the contributions of experts and stakeholders may become determining factors, especially when the learners involved have no clear picture of the language use situations that are typical for the selected domains.

## 3  Deriving tasks from lists of language use situations

A description of situations and domains of language use must be further refined in order to be convertible into a workable tool for curriculum, syllabus or assessment design. After all, domains and situations only describe contexts in which language is used, but do not specify what particular things a language learner should do with language in order to function efficiently in these situations. To reach this level of specification, 'task' can be used as the basic unit of description (Long, 1985, 2005a; see also Chapter 1 in this volume for a definition of 'task'). We can then formulate an answer to the question 'what' (what should the language learner be able to do with language?).

To derive a set of tasks from a list of language use situations, various methodologies can be adopted:

a *Observations in the target domain and in the selected language use situations*. For instance, in a number of Flemish curriculum development projects (De Groof, 2000; Lanssens *et al.*, 2001), researchers at the Centre for Language and Education conducted observations in the workplace or on the training floor to establish which tasks were typical for particular language use situations in the professional training domain.
b *Gathering 'expert' opinions*: written and oral surveys, using open and/or closed questionnaires, can be administered to people who have long-term experience in the domain and in the relevant situations.
c *Sampling language learners' experiences*: if the language learners already have personal experiences in the selected language use situations, they may be able to make explicit what particular tasks are relevant for their purposes or with which particular tasks they experience difficulties.

These different methodologies may be combined and may be applied before the development of the course as well as during the course. The latter is typically the case with negotiated, learner-centred syllabuses (Nunan, 1988).

The above-mentioned Flemish needs analyses showed that many language use situations often involve more than one language task. For instance, two typical language use situations in the above-mentioned informal/tourist domain of Dutch as a foreign language involve the tasks illustrated in Figure 3.

| Language use situations | Language tasks |
|---|---|
| Making a hotel reservation by telephone | • understand/ask questions about the room<br>• answer questions about parking facilities<br>• express personal requests and wishes<br>• understand simple instructions about payment |
| asking/understanding a route description | • understand/ask questions about how to drive to a destination<br>• answer questions to a person who asks for a route description<br>• understand simple instructions from a person who describes a route |

**Figure 3**   Examples of tasks relevant to specific language use situations related to the use of Dutch as a foreign language in the informal/tourist domain

In order to use 'task' as a unit of description for goal selection and description in curriculum design, a number of parameters need to be selected that, taken together, allow the curriculum designer to accurately describe the target tasks. Furthermore, the way the target tasks are described by these parameters should be recognizable for teachers when presented as goals they should try to pursue.

Three interrelated problems typically arise on taking the step from a list of language use situations to a detailed description of tasks:

1 Deriving tasks from a list of language use situations that have been distinguished within a given domain may lead to very long, even endless, lists of tasks (i.e. the problem of specification).
2 Descriptions of tasks, such as the one in Figure 3, often do not provide any information about the level of complexity and difficulty of the target tasks i.e. the required level of language performance the target task involves (i.e. the problem of complexity).
3 It cannot be taken for granted that performance of one task implies that a person is able to perform a more or less similar task (the problem of extrapolation).

In order to deal with these three interrelated problems, we have coined the term 'type task' which we will discuss in the next section.

## 4 From tasks to type tasks

### 4.1 Defining type tasks

The first problem, as listed above, indicates that the description of target tasks involves striking a balance between specific and general goals. While very specific curriculum goals have the advantage that teachers and syllabus/test developers can readily adapt them to classroom activities and assessment tools, the disadvantage of strong specification is that goals become too numerous, and teachers may perceive the resulting list of target tasks as unattainable. Goals that are formulated in more general terms, on the other hand, may help teachers and syllabus developers to set priorities and to distinguish clear threads running through the curriculum, but they demand far more interpretation and translation work from the teacher in adapting them in concrete classroom activities, or in specifying a criterion level of performance.

In an attempt to deal with the problem of specification, many second language researchers operating within a task-based perspective have developed different ways of clustering and classifying

concrete language tasks (Candlin, 1987; Crookes, 1989; Crookes & Rulon, 1985; Doughty & Pica, 1986; Duff, 1986; Foster & Skehan, 1996; Norris *et al.*, 1998; Norris *et al.*, 2002; Nunan, 1989; Ortega, 1995; Pica *et al.*, 1993; Robinson *et al.*, 1995; Skehan, 1996). Long (1985) developed the concept 'task type'. This concept allows for the classification of concrete language tasks on the basis of their common characteristics, though they may differ in detail. For instance, 'ordering a pizza', 'ordering a paella', and 'ordering a kebab' can be classified in the superordinate task type 'ordering a meal'. Similarly 'buying a TV', 'buying a microwave' and 'buying a car' can be clustered in the task type 'buying an item'. According to Long (1985), language tasks are specified by verb plus noun phrase (NP), while a task type is specified by a verb alone or by a verb plus generic NP.

This suggests that Long only uses the feature 'language action' to categorize task types. However, referring to the concept 'pedagogical task' for designing task-based syllabuses, Long (1985) identifies more parameters to determine the grading or sequencing of task types: presupposed knowledge, location in time and space, number of parties involved, pace, duration. In a similar vein, Skehan (1996) developed a scheme enabling the description of task difficulty and task complexity: parameters included were code complexity, cognitive complexity and communicative stress. Based on this scheme, Norris *et al.* (1998) and Norris *et al.* (2002) identified a number of parameters which characterize language tasks and affect language performance. In Norris *et al.* (2002), three processing factors were identified and used: code command, cognitive operations and communicative adaptation (based on Skehan, 1996). All these taxonomies imply that (target) task performance is determined by the dynamic interaction of a broad set of linguistic, cognitive and contextual parameters (see also Weir, 2004).

The crux of the exercise consists in identifying the key parameters that account for (relatively) stable language performance. In determining these key parameters, one can either adopt a top-down approach, starting from an a priori, fixed set of parameters, or a bottom-up approach, which starts from the extensive list of concrete language tasks that were identified as relevant within the target domain and target language use situations on the basis of needs analysis. In the latter approach, which we advocate and will illustrate, parameters are identified that are hypothesized to account for stable language performance within the given domain. A 'type task', then, is the result of clustering several language tasks, derived from one and the same domain, that share a number of linguistic and non-

linguistic features, which are described as settings of parameters. Like Long's task type, a 'type task' is more generic than concrete target tasks, but in comparison with Long's concept, a 'type task' is identified and characterized by more parameters than just the 'language action' (e.g. ordering a meal).

The 'type task' concept is dynamic in the sense that it does not start from a fixed taxonomy. The domain itself is the starting point for the selection of parameters that will cluster specific language tasks into type tasks. As a result, type tasks can be seen as prototypical tasks for a particular domain. The emphasis on the domain-specification of type tasks is motivated by two arguments. In the first place, as the above-mentioned empirical studies substantiated, language learning needs are typically tied to functioning in specific domains. In other words, target tasks are embedded within a domain. If this is the case, this should be reflected in the clustering of type tasks as well. Secondly, if language learning is situation-specific and tied to 'real operating conditions' (Johnson, 1995), then the problem of extrapolation should first be dealt with within the same domain, rather than across different domains.

## 4.2 Parameters for the description of 'type tasks'

To illustrate the parameters for the description of tasks, we will use two other examples of needs analyses and target task description that were carried out by the Centre for Language and Education.

The first example focused on the second language learning needs of young NNS children in Flanders and the Netherlands. In particular, this study involved the description of the attainment goals that young NNS children, acquiring academic Dutch as a second language in Flanders and the Netherlands, should have reached at the end of kindergarten i.e. before enrolling into Dutch-medium primary school at the age of six. Van den Branden *et al*. (2001) who conducted this study, took all decisions with regard to goal selection and description by drawing on multiple sources (teachers, headteachers, syllabus developers, policy makers, educational counsellors) and multiple methods (surveys, interviews, round table discussions and the analysis of syllabuses for Dutch language teaching). The round table discussions were organized to reach a broad consensus among all informants as to the particulars of the goal description. 'Task' was selected as the basic unit for the description of these attainment goals. The following parameters were used for the description of type tasks:

a *Skills involved*: does the language learner have to speak, listen, read or write in the language use situation?
b *Text genre*: what kind of message has to be conveyed or understood?
c *Level of information processing*: at what level must the linguistic information be cognitively processed?
d *Interlocutor*: who are the language learner's interlocutor(s)?
e *Topic*: what is the topic of conversation?
f *Contextual support*: to what extent is the message embedded in a supporting context?

In addition, at the so-called micro-level, a number of linguistic features involved in performing these target tasks were listed. As such, the demands with regard to the comprehension and adequate/ correct production of specific linguistic items (words, sounds, grammatical rules) when performing these tasks were also made explicit.

All of the parameters listed above for the description of type tasks involved further decisions, especially with regard to the level of specification that was required or desirable. For this framework, which was supposed to be used by the young NNS children's teachers, headteachers, educationalists, syllabus and test developers, the various parameters were specified as in Figure 4.

| Skill | Speaking, listening, reading or writing, or a combination of certain skills |
|---|---|
| Text genre | Instruction, story, answer to a question, question, account (e.g. of a personal experience), or description |
| Information processing | Copying level, descriptive level, restructuring level and evaluative level of information processing (see below) |
| Interlocutor | Oneself, familiar peer, unfamiliar peer, familiar adult, unfamiliar adult |
| Topic | Physical and mental actions, concrete objects, personal experiences, experiences of others, personal opinions, feelings, desires, and those of others |
| Contextual support | The 'here-and-now' versus the 'there-and-then' |
| Linguistic features | Frequent word list, frequent formulae, list of basic grammar rules, basic insights with regard to reading and writing |

**Figure 4**    Parameters for task description in the project 'Attainment goals for Dutch as a second language at the beginning of Dutch-medium primary education in Flanders and the Netherlands'

This led to goals such as:

> Listening at the descriptive level of information processing: the child is able to understand oral instructions for a physical action in the here and now given by the teacher, e.g. 'now we all sit down.' (Van den Branden *et al*., 2001: 24)

As can be inferred from Figure 4 and from the example, the number of subcategories distinguished *within* a parameter was limited. This is one way of clustering long lists of target tasks into operational sets of type tasks. For instance, in the example above, the topic of the teacher's instruction is specified: it is an instruction aimed at having a child perform a physical action. However, what particular physical action the instruction refers to ('jumping', 'running' or 'lying down') is not further specified at the type task level, because this would make the list too long.

Different combinations of the parameters should result in different type tasks. This does not necessarily imply that all possible combinations need to be realized. The very essence of goal description in curriculum design is to select the combinations that are relevant to the learners' needs. Together, these constitute the set of target type tasks. For instance, in the above-mentioned framework, the children do not need to be able to write about their personal experiences at that time as they will only learn to read and write in the course of the next year.

Task description is more effective for assessment practices when it allows for concrete statements on the minimal levels of language proficiency that need to be attained by the language learner (cf. the second problem of complexity mentioned above). Of course, a 5-year-old child can produce an account of a personal experience, or an adult NNS can state that their child will not come to school simply by producing a few one-word sentences, but this will require a high level of cooperation from the interlocutor. It is therefore preferable to subdivide the parameters selected for the description of target tasks into different levels of complexity. This makes it possible to relate them to performance levels for particular criteria and to use them for the description of goals at different levels of language proficiency.

We will illustrate this with another example of target task description conducted at the Centre for Language and Education that shows how a description of type tasks was derived from the above-mentioned needs analysis involving foreign language learners of Dutch (see section 3.2). This type task description not only served as the basis for developing the official exams for Dutch as a foreign

language, but also aimed to inspire DFL course design. Efforts there-fore were taken to describe the target tasks in terms that were intelligible and concrete for teachers and syllabus developers.

For each of the four domains that came out of the language needs analysis (see section 3.2), between 40 and 50 language use situations were identified and between 100 and 150 language tasks. This long list of tasks was clustered on the basis of a set of parameters. For this project, the selection of parameters was inspired by Cucchiarini & Jaspaert (1996), the Common European Framework of Reference, the Framework of Reference for Dutch as a second language (Coördinatie-eenheid Prove, 1996) and the Modern Languages Training Profiles developed by the Department of Educational Development of the Flemish Community (Dienst voor Onderwijsont-wikkeling, 2001). The selection of parameters was also partly based on the authors' previous experiences with target task description and on the intuition of field experts. Eventually, five parameters relating to linguistic, socio-cognitive and contextual features were selected.

The first parameter that was distinguished was *language action*. Language actions, rather than *skills*, were selected as a parameter to avoid the artificial boundaries (e.g. between speaking and listening), that are constructed in language analysis but do not necessarily exist in natural language use. Tasks which involve a similar kind of language action were clustered together.

The second parameter was *public*. This parameter was further subdivided into different subcategories referring to the distance between the learner and his interlocutor(s): 'oneself', 'familiar inter-locutor' and 'unfamiliar interlocutor'. Differentiation in terms of interlocutor not only implies differentiation in terms of tasks, but the different subcategories were also ordered on a scale of increasing complexity, following the hypothesis that the greater the distance between the language learner and the interlocutor, the more complex the task will be.

The third parameter was *level of information processing*. This parameter refers to the cognitive level at which the information in a text, or information that needs to be conveyed by the learner has to be processed. The expected level of processing refers to the cognitive operations the language user has to perform in order to use the language. Clearly, this is not an inherent characteristic of a task or text, but of the intended use of a text by the learner. This parameter is partly based on Bereiter & Scardamalia's (1987) distinction between 'knowledge telling' and 'knowledge transformation', and is comparable to Skehan's (1998) parameter of 'transformation', which

refers to the extent to which the language learners have to operate on the information presented or retrieved, or are simply required to reproduce it. Four levels of information processing were distinguished (Cucchiarini & Jaspaert, 1995); these levels were hierarchically ordered along a continuum of increasing complexity, as demonstrated in Figure 5 overleaf.

a  At the *copying* level, the learner simply has to reproduce information without processing it for comprehension (e.g. reading a text aloud).
b  At the *descriptive level*, the learner has to process the information in the same structure as it is presented.
c  At the *restructuring level*, the reader has to rearrange and restructure the information provided.
d  At the *evaluative level*, the learner has to reflect on the language by comparing the information provided in the text with information provided in another text or source.

The fourth parameter was *text cluster*, which included a clustering of the most prototypical text genres involved. The fifth parameter i.e. *text features*, relates to linguistic aspects of task performance that determine the complexity of a text, such as grammar, vocabulary, text structure, topic, register and aspects related to pronunciation.

The combination of these parameters allowed for the clustering of long lists of target tasks into workable lists of type tasks, which were still sufficiently informative to inspire and guide course and test design. In Figures 6 and 7, we illustrate how the type tasks were actually described for teachers of Dutch as a Foreign Language. The descriptions in the example were taken from the CNaVT exam for 'societal language proficiency'. The description of the type tasks consists of two parts. First, the tasks are formulated in full sentences, including explicit reference to the parameters (Figure 6). Next, in Figure 7a the type tasks are described in more detail and in a more schematic way. This enables the reader to distinguish between the different parameters.

Figure 7 also includes the settings of the other relevant parameters, including the micro level of linguistic parameters (Figure 7b). Although providing both kinds of target task description (as in Figures 6 and 7) might seem unnecessary, describing target tasks in full sentences does make them easier to interpret for teachers and learners. Describing them in tables, on the other hand, provides a clearer and more transparent visual picture of the parameters.

The five parameters listed above do not constitute a set that can be

| Low level of processing | | High level of processing | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Relatively global comprehension or (re)production of information in the text is demanded | | Processing information demands more than mere comprehension or (re)production. The (representation of) information needs to be rearranged, restructured, adapted to the situation | |
| **Copying level** **very low** | **Descriptive level** **low** | **Restructuring level** **high** | **Evaluative level** **very high** |
| Literally reproducing the information that is offered; repeating something said or written; producing true imitations | Processing or producing the information in much the same way as it is offered, or as it is already available | Imposing another structure to the information than the one it presents: selecting parts of information, establishing relationships between bits of information, designing a new order or structure to available information | Comparing the information of two different sources with each other, and reflecting on the possible use and relevance of each of the information sources |
| e.g. reading aloud a letter | e.g. filling in a form asking for personalia at a post office | e.g. participating in a job interview | e.g. comparing the information in two articles in order to write a paper |

**Figure 5**    Description of different levels of information processing as a parameter for describing task complexity

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**TYPE TASKS**

**On a descriptive level, the language user can:**

1 understand the main thoughts and ideas with regard to information in texts such as news reports, documentaries, texts for entertainment (e.g. films, shows), sports commentaries.

**On a restructuring level, the language user can:**

2 select relevant information and instructions in texts such as public announcements, advertisements, commercials.

**On an evaluating level, the language user can:**

3 compare the information, arguments, and conclusions in different texts such as commercials and advertisements.

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**Figure 6**   Type tasks for the domain 'societal language proficiency' formulated in full sentences for teachers of Dutch as a Foreign Language

used invariably across different domains and situations of target language use. The selection of parameters needed to describe target tasks for particular needs profiles depends on the breadth of the domain in question. When the domain is very specific and narrowly defined, there will be less variation in terms of target tasks, and thus there will be a smaller need for a variety of parameters and parameter settings. For example, for a language exam for top officials in the Belgian federal government, the description of target tasks could be restricted to a reference to three parameters (communication partner, topic and structure) because the target language use domain was so specific. On the other hand, broader domains necessitate descriptions for a greater variety of parameters.

## 4.3 Type tasks and practicalities in second language teaching

It can be seen that task-based curriculum design does not treat language performance as unidimensional. It does not embrace a concept like 'general language proficiency'. In contrast with context-independent scales of proficiency levels, such as the overall proficiency scale of the CEFR, functional language performance and language development are not regarded by adherents of the task-based philosophy as strictly linear and cumulative.

At present, however, this stance is more strongly supported by anecdotal evidence than by empirical research. We all seem to know

| Language action | Text part | Text | Level of processing | Examples of situations |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Comprehending the main thought, and following a train of thought | in<br>• information | in<br>• newsreels<br>• documentaries<br>• entertainment (movies, shows, etc.)<br>• sports commentaries | descriptive | • e.g. watching a Dutch movie<br>• e.g. listening to Dutch radio news to find out what is going on in the world |
| Selecting | • information<br>• instructions | in<br>• public announcements<br>• advertisements and commercials | restructuring | • e.g. comprehending traffic information on the radio to avoid traffic jams<br>• e.g. listening to advertisements coming through the loudspeakers in a shop |
| Comparing | • information<br>• arguments<br>• conclusions | in<br>• advertisements and commercials | evaluative | • e.g. comparing information on different tariffs of mobile phoning with each other in order to find out which formula is the cheapest |

**Figure 7a**    Schematic presentation of the type tasks of Figure 6

| Textual features | |
|---|---|
| Vocabulary | Words, formulae and expressions are predominantly frequent |
| Grammar | Sentences are predominantly simple. Complex sentence structures are relatively infrequent |
| Structure/Coherence/Length | The structure of the text is clear and explicit. Short texts prevail, although relatively longer texts also occur |
| Pronounciation | Pronounciation is clear |
| Tempo | Tempo of speaking is normal |
| Topics | Topics relate to different aspects of life in society, especially public and cultural life |
| Register | The register may be formal or informal |

**Figure 7b**   Textual features of the type tasks in Figure 6

intuitively that persons who are able to read scientific articles in a second language at a high academic level (particularly those relevant to their own field of expertise) will not necessarily be able to understand what is on the menu in a restaurant (typically perceived as a 'lower' level of language proficiency).

But does this mean that task-based target task description does not allow for specific references to particular or increasing levels of proficiency? As stated above, in order to facilitate course and test design, target tasks that are derived from a language needs analysis are preferably described in terms of the minimal level of quality and complexity that the learner should be able to master when performing the target tasks. If target task descriptions do not include any reference to (minimal) quality and complexity levels, the educational 'field' will probably not be inclined to use them, because linear views of language development still strongly prevail among teachers, headteachers and students alike.

This is why in all of the examples of needs analyses and target tasks descriptions that we have described above, a vertical dimension referring to relative levels of complexity was included. For instance, in order to compare the overall level of complexity of the five domains that came out of the analysis of the language learning needs of adult second language learners in Flanders (see section 3.2), we initially designed Figure 8. The indicated level for each of the
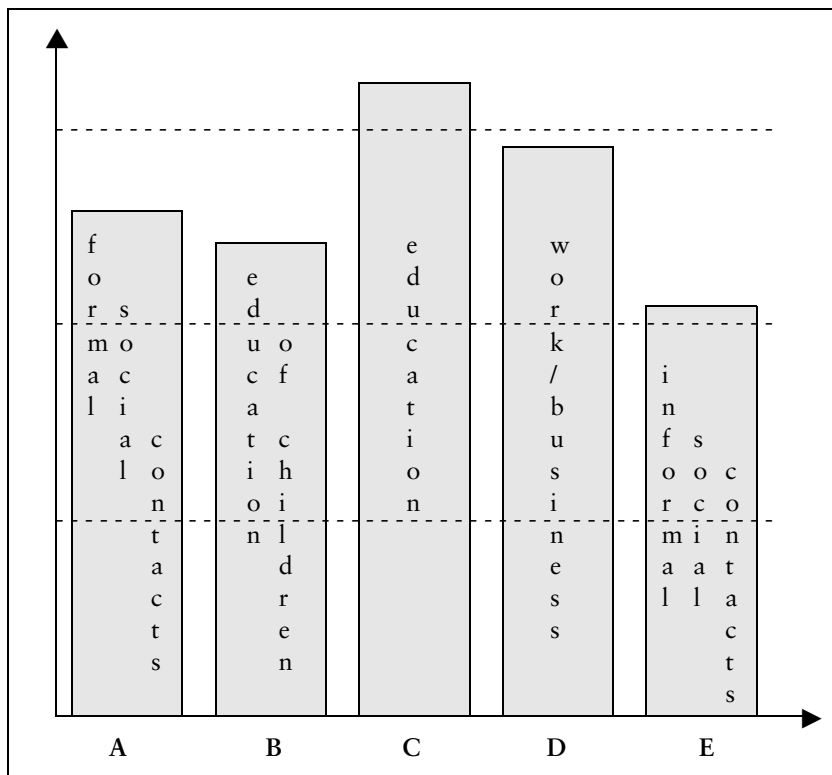
**Figure 8**    Five needs domains for adult learners of Dutch as a second
language in Flanders, visually related to complexity

domains was purely hypothetical and represented a common denomi-
nator for all the type tasks involved.

The hypothesis of domain-dependent language learning needs
underlying Figure 8 raised a number of questions among teachers,
educationalists and test developers in Flanders. One prominent
question was how to practically organize DSL courses on the basis of
this model. In Flanders, there simply were not enough logistic,
financial and human resources available to organize different DSL
courses for so many domains. Moreover, many adult students'
language learning needs were not clear at the beginning of their DSL
route as they enrolled in their first course of basic Dutch. Language
learning needs often only become clear to the learners themselves
and/or to the teacher during the DSL course itself. Further, teachers
and policy makers organizing DSL courses tended to use more

general descriptions of attainment targets (cf. 'general language proficiency'), relating these to a cumulative system of fixed levels of language proficiency. All these practicalities referred, in one way or another, to the problem of extrapolation: to what extent does language performance in a particular domain, or in particular language use situations, predict or guarantee adequate performance in other domains or language use situations? Were the boundaries of domains really as strict as suggested in Figure 8?

Interestingly, the above-mentioned analysis of the language learning needs of adult second language learners of Dutch in Flanders (see section 3.2) also included a detailed analysis at the level of vocabulary. From a spoken and written corpus of 2,500,000 tokens, a basic vocabulary list was derived of 1,372 highly frequent words spreading across a range of tasks, situations and domains. This study indicated that, at a very basic level of language performance, a relatively restricted list of words can be used in many different contexts and in fulfilling a range of goals. However, when task demands are raised with regard to other parameters (e.g. higher levels of information processing, more specific topics, less contextual support, etc.), these basic words lose currency and, as a consequence, demands at the level of linguistic features also become higher. On the basis of this line of reasoning, then, Figure 8 was transformed to Figure 9.

Like the previous one, Figure 9 is based on a working hypothesis, which needs to be empirically substantiated: the more complex language performance becomes, the more tasks will differ with regard to (the settings of) a growing number of parameters. The above-mentioned research strongly suggests that this is the case for the linguistic parameter 'vocabulary', but this line of reasoning might apply to other parameters as well. As can be inferred from Figure 9, the needs analysis into DSL learning needs for NNS adults in Flanders indicated that, at just above basic level, tasks typical for language use situations in the social domain could be distinguished from tasks in the educational and professional domain. On a second level, involving increasingly complex and specified tasks demands, tasks situated in particular subdomains of the educational, social and professional domain respectively were claimed to differ strongly from each other with regard to a number of parameters, and therefore needed to be distinguished in the figure.

In fact Figure 9 represents an acceptable compromise between the way Dutch was taught as a second language at the time the model was designed (with almost all courses being based on linguistic structure and entailing attainment targets of general language
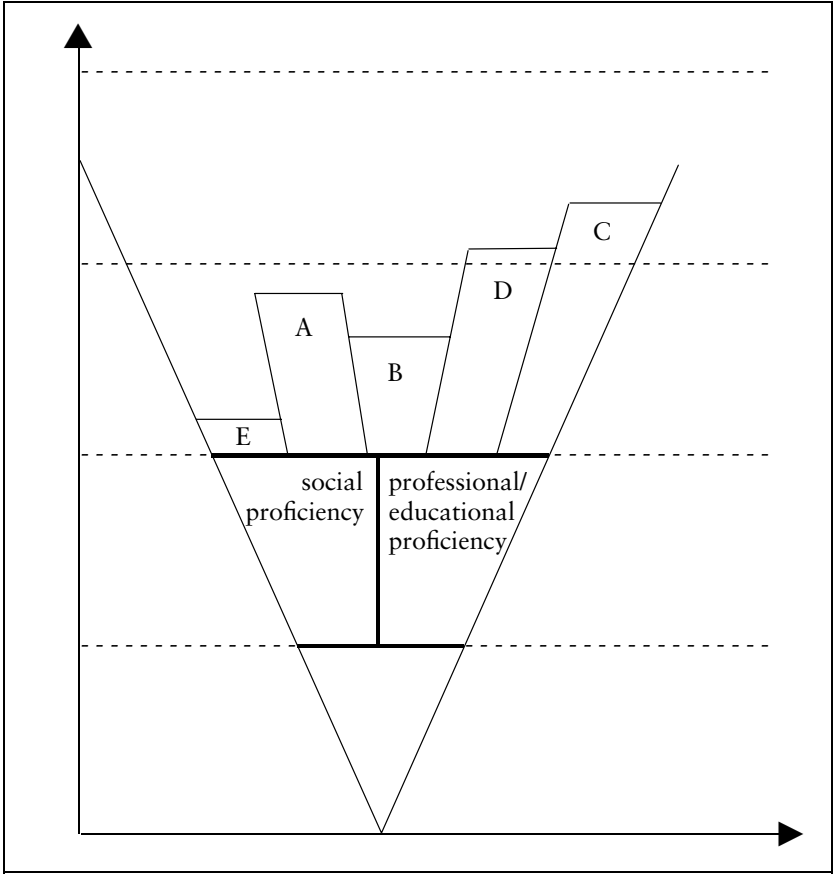
**Figure 9** The 'inverted pyramid'. An alternative way of visualizing the five needs domains in Figure 8

proficiency) and the move towards more needs-based, learner-centred courses. According to this model, courses of general Dutch language proficiency should be organized for language learners with different language learning needs only at a basic level. These courses, then, are primarily to be conceived as preparatory courses, providing language learners with the basics of Dutch that are needed to enable them to follow courses built around attainment targets of a more specific nature and which, in turn, demand a higher level of Dutch language proficiency. Following the basic level, different courses have to be organized for learners with language learning needs in social, educational and professional domains respectively.

Should sufficient resources be available, one could argue that there is no reason not to organize DSL courses for the various relevant societal language use domains from the basic level onwards. Responding to language learners' specific needs increases learners' motivation to follow DSL courses, their appreciation of what they learn and the extent to which they can apply what they learn in class in the outside world (Berben, 2003; Plichart, 2003).

Nonetheless, the organization of needs-specific courses, whether at the basic level or beyond, does not relieve us from the task of investigating to what extent other parameters besides vocabulary allow transfer across domains. How distinct are domains? Can overlap across domains be observed only for linguistic features or is this also the case for other parameters? Which combinations of parameters determine that (target) tasks are similar or not and, consequently, whether extrapolation can be assumed or not?

## 5  Conclusions

A task-based approach attempts to take learners' language learning needs as its starting point by interpreting them in the first place as an answer to the question 'why?' The answer to this question provides insights into the societal domains in which NNSs want to function while using the target language. The logical consequence of this starting point is that the answer to the question 'what' language the learner needs to acquire for functioning in a societal domain is determined by what he needs to be able to do with the language: which tasks are essential in the situations that are relevant to the learner, and which qualitative level of performance needs to be reached in order to perform these tasks adequately? In terms of curriculum design, tasks become the prime units of description for the selection of goals, rather than certain components of the linguistic system (such as grammatical rules or vocabulary).

The route to follow in order to describe NNS' language learning needs from a task-based perspective is summarized in Figure 10.

Research on language needs can determine particular domains and situations of language use. The next step in the process is to derive tasks (what people have to be able to do with language) from the selected situations. These tasks can then be used as the basic units to describe language performance demands or goals, which can be the basis for curriculum design, language teaching and assessment. Various (combinations of) methodologies have been suggested to derive tasks from selected lists of language use situations.
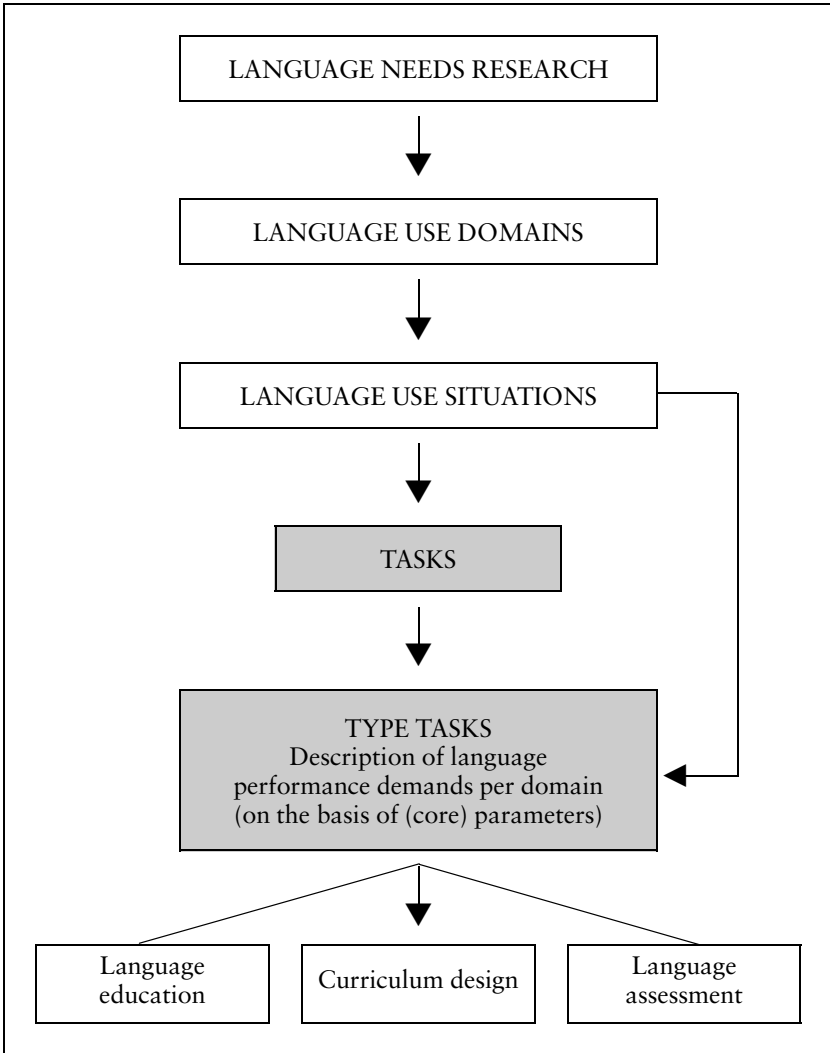
**Figure 10**   Flow chart of task-based second language needs research and
            target task description

Task description typically raises a number of challenges. In this
article, we have discussed three. First, that the result of deriving tasks
from language situations might lead to endless lists. We have argued
that it may be unworkable for curriculum design, test design and
language teaching to treat a task that differs from another task in
only one of the above-mentioned parameters as an essentially

different task with no links whatsoever to other tasks, either cognitively, psycholinguistically or sociolinguistically.

A second challenge raised in this article has to do with defining task complexity and difficulty. If tasks are to be used as workable tools for curriculum design or test development by teachers and educationalists, clear references to (minimal) levels of performance need to be made.

The third challenge we raised had to do with generalization: to what extent may we assume that a person who can perform a particular task is capable of performing another task within the same domain? Does adequate performance of task X in a certain language use domain imply adequate performance of task Y in the same, or even in another, domain?

We have argued that one way to overcome these problems might be (partly) found in the use of 'type tasks'. Tasks that can be characterized as 'similar' are clustered together in 'type tasks'. This process of clustering is achieved on the basis of a set of parameters, each of which is further distinguished into a number of subcategories, which refer to complexity levels. To what extent some of these parameters can be seen as core parameters for the definition of type tasks is not clear yet.

The parameters should not be seen as static. Their use can vary according to the level of specification of a language use domain. The more specific a domain (or subdomain) becomes, the smaller the number of different tasks will probably be, and the less the parameter settings will vary. This implies that in these cases, target task description might be accomplished using only a limited number of parameters, and reclustering into type tasks may not even be necessary.

All these claims need to be further substantiated empirically. Crucial questions that need to be answered in follow-up studies are whether, and to what extent, the concept of type tasks really contributes to the reclustering of more concrete tasks. Can we establish a set of parameters that will allow for transfer across tasks, include non-core parameters and provide answers to questions such as:

> To what extent can we assume that a second language learner who, for instance, performs the target task 'asking questions about a hotel room (when making a hotel reservation)' will also be able to 'ask questions about the route to the hotel' (a task derived from the same language use situation)?

As this example shows, research into core parameters not only needs

to identify these parameters, but also establish their particular range. One of the main challenges for research into task-based curriculum and test design, then, is to study the impact of parameter variations on task performance. Research will also have to be conducted to discover the boundaries of transferability across domains.

# 3   *Tasks for absolute beginners and beyond: Developing and sequencing tasks at basic proficiency levels*

Goedele Duran and Griet Ramaut

## 1 Introduction

Much of the research on task-based language teaching (TBLT) focuses on highly qualified students at intermediate stages of second language development (Bygate *et al.*, 2001; Ellis, 2003). However, when dealing with learners of low education or with learners who have just started to learn a new language, the question arises whether a task-based approach still works. Many teachers believe that the language input inherent in task-based activities (such as the instructions needed to perform information-gap tasks) is too complex for absolute beginners. Likewise, absolute beginners are thought to lack the basic speaking skills needed to exchange information, negotiate meaning or scaffold each others' language output, all of which are supposed to 'drive' language learning according to task-based principles. In addition, some teachers believe it is impossible for second language learners to start using a language without explicitly knowing something about its simplest structures (syntax) and basic vocabulary first.

Nevertheless, there are some descriptions of task-based language learning for beginners. For instance, Willis (1996) gives an account of TBLT for beginners and young learners, implying that task-based language learning in these groups is possible. However, when she describes tasks suitable for these groups, these are mainly restricted to vocabulary-centred activities, often involving written language and focusing on form.

In this chapter, we will show that a task-based approach can be suitable and practicable at basic language levels, provided a number of conditions at the level of task design and task implementation are fulfilled. We will illustrate our ideas by referring to a syllabus that was recently developed in Flanders for the teaching of Dutch as a second language. The main aim of this syllabus is to promote the

early second language acquisition of foreign children who arrive in Flanders (where Dutch is the main medium of instruction) between the ages of 12 and 18, who have not learnt Dutch as their mother tongue and are enrolled in Dutch-medium compulsory education upon arrival. Since this syllabus was designed to cover lower-intermediate levels as well, this chapter also tackles the intricate issue of sequencing tasks in a syllabus. We will explore which steps can be taken to gradually increase task difficulty in order to further promote language learners' growing language proficiency. It will be argued that tasks can be placed on a continuum according to their level of complexity on the basis of a restricted number of parameters. Manipulating the variable settings of these parameters will be shown to be a powerful tool when it comes to handling the sequencing issue in syllabus design.

## 2  The language learning needs of newcomers

Most of the youngsters for whom the above-mentioned syllabus for Dutch as a second language is designed are children of refugees, coming to Belgium from different parts of the world. As soon as they arrive, these 'newcomers' are officially obliged to start attending a Dutch-medium school, even though they do not possess any proficiency in the language of instruction. Specific policy measures were issued by the Ministry of Education of the Flemish community with regard to the first year these pupils are enrolled in a Dutch-speaking school. Secondary schools (for pupils aged 12 to 18) are granted additional financial means to organize a 'reception class' for NNS newcomers if at least 25 newcomers have enlisted. In this reception class newcomers can spend one full year learning the basics of Dutch. Afterwards, the newcomers are expected to join a mainstream Dutch-medium class corresponding to their age and their educational background. From that moment on, schools that enlist 'ex-newcomers' are provided additional funding through the Educational Priority Policy means of the Flemish government. These additional funds are to be used by the school to provide extra support to children at risk of failing and, in the case of newcomers, to further promote their development of the Dutch academic language proficiency they need to be successful in Flemish mainstream education.

The organization of reception classes for newcomers during the first year of their stay in Belgium runs counter to the Flemish government's overall educational policy not to organize pull-out classes for pupils who have acquired a mother tongue other than Dutch. In line with research on the effectiveness of current edu-

cational approaches for language minorities (Nicaise, 2001; Short & Boyson, 2004; Thomas & Collier, 2000, 2001, 2002), all the non-native speakers of Dutch who were born in Flanders are integrated in mainstream classes from kindergarten onwards. Pull-out classes have been abolished and have made way for additional pupil support within the mainstream classroom, cooperative learning in mixed ability groups and contextualized language learning. At the level of primary education, this policy is also stretched to include 'new-comers': during the first year of their stay in Belgium, the number of hours they spend in a pull-out reception class is restricted and great care is taken to mainstream the children from the very beginning. However, at the level of secondary education, the Flemish government has argued that the breadth of the gap between the Dutch language proficiency of mainstream pupils (regardless of language background) and the linguistic demands of the curriculum on the one hand, and the Dutch language proficiency of the newcomers on the other, places an extremely high burden on the mainstream teachers. Mainstreaming the newcomers in secondary classes from their very first day would increase the heterogeneity of the classroom population dramatically, in view of the fact that the heterogeneity among newcomers themselves, in terms of L1, educational background, cognitive development and socio-emotional state, is quite substantial in its own right. Therefore, for one year, the newcomers' basic Dutch language proficiency is promoted in the reception classes. Reception class teachers are encouraged to establish clear links with the mainstream curriculum throughout the reception year. During the second half of the reception year, the newcomers are given the opportunity to get acquainted with regular classes and the school or class that they will attend from the second year on.

Needs analyses were carried out to establish a list of language learning goals for the reception class (Centrum voor Taal en Migratie, 2005) (see Chapter 2 for more details on needs analyses). This list provides teachers with a description of the tasks that newcomers should be able to perform at the end of the reception year in order to stand a good chance of success in the mainstream class from the second year on, and a description of language learning goals that the teachers in the mainstream curriculum should work towards after the first year. This needs analysis was carried out and co-ordinated by researchers at the Centre for Language and Education at the University of Leuven. The needs analysis included non-participant classroom observations in regular and reception classes, analyses of syllabuses and curriculum plans and an extended range of interviews with teachers. A set of relevant language learning goals

were described in terms of (a) the domains in which the newcomers have to able to function in order to integrate well into Flemish school life, (b) the language use situations that are typical for these domains, and (c) the tasks that the learner should be able to perform in these situations. The list of target tasks was thoroughly discussed with various stakeholders, including second language teachers, reception class teachers, curriculum designers, inspectors, educational counsellors and policy makers. These intensive consultations eventually led to a consensus list of language learning goals for newcomers.

The most important domain in which newcomers need to learn to use Dutch is the school. When we further analyse their required level of Dutch language proficiency at school, two important clusters of language use situations emerge. First, newcomers should be able to function socially at school. For instance, they should be able to understand the teachers' class managing instructions and to understand greetings and common practical requests at school, such as: 'Can you hand me a pencil, please?', 'Whose scissors are these?' and 'You have to hand in the assignment tomorrow morning'. The newcomer should also be able to express messages such as: 'Can I go to the toilet please?', 'Good afternoon', 'I am sick' and 'Can I have a sheet of paper, please?' Many of the social language skills that newcomers need to develop in order to function within the school context, will also be of practical use in the world outside. Secondly, newcomers also need to be able to function academically. As soon as possible, they should possess the language proficiency needed to understand oral explanations by the teacher and information provided in textbooks, for example, in order to build up academic knowledge and skills.

Unlike many other second language courses, receptive skills are at the heart of the curriculum for the reception class. In order to process the cognitively demanding and disembedded input of academic texts and messages (Cummins, 1986; Mohan, 1986; for more details see Chapter 5 in this volume) and to acquire subject content from the information provided, newcomers need to develop extensive listening and reading skills in Dutch. This does not mean that productive skills are not covered in the curriculum. They are also important to enable newcomers to realize their full potential at school. For instance, newcomers have to be able to ask the teacher or other pupils questions about the content of subject matter and to make notes during lessons. After the reception year, teachers will also expect them to participate in oral and written tests and classroom interaction, and to hand in written assignments. Yet, as far as language output is concerned, getting across the message is more essential than spelling correctly

and not producing any grammatical errors. At basic proficiency levels, fluency and complexity prevail over accuracy. Follow-up teachers in the second year should tolerate the interlanguage errors newcomers are still bound to produce as they continue to 'crack the code', and should promote the acquisition of productive skills. In other words, the job does not end when the newcomers leave the reception class.

## 3  Designing a complexity scale

When considering the language learning goals newcomers need to reach, one conclusion is evident: newcomers have to make tremendous progress within one school year. They start from scratch and they have to end up understanding academic texts at the level of the mainstream academic syllabus. When overviewing the wide array of language use situations in which newcomers need to be able to function at school, the range of attainment targets is striking. This leaves the syllabus designer with the problem of developing tasks for the first period and then sequencing and balancing tasks so that the newcomer can make progress in the most efficient way.

To be able to manipulate the complexity of the tasks that newcomers have to perform, and to build in a gradual increase of task complexity in the syllabus for reception classes, we selected a set of crucial parameters describing task complexity (see also Chapter 2). These parameters are listed in Figure 1. This scheme has also guided the development of a task-based language test (the TASAN test) that is now administered at the end of the reception class to measure which Dutch language skills the newcomers have developed (Ramaut *et al.*, 2003; see also Chapter 7 in this volume). By characterizing the tasks in the syllabus and the test according to the parameters in the scheme, task complexity can be assessed and tasks manipulated if they prove to be too difficult or too easy.

This complexity scale primarily applies to receptive listening and reading tasks. On the basis of relevant literature (Council of Europe, 2001; Norris *et al.*, 1998; Prabhu, 1987; Robinson, 2001b; Skehan, 1998, 2001) and extensive consultation of Flemish field experts, three categories of parameters for task complexity were distinguished:

a  parameters concerning the world represented in the task;
b  parameters with regard to processing demands required for task performance;
c  parameters with regard to linguistic input features.

| Parameters | SIMPLE | | COMPLEX |
|---|---|---|---|
| **(a) World** | | | |
| 1 **Level of abstraction:** concrete or abstract approach to the topic? | Concrete descriptions (here-and-now) | In other time/space (there-and-then) | Abstract perspective |
| 2 **Degree of visual support:** to what extent is visual support provided, and does it support task performance? | Much visual support | Limited visual support | No visual support |
| 3 **Linguistic context:** to what extent is linguistic context available, and does it support task performance? | High level of redundancy; low information density | Limited level of redundancy | High density of information; low level of redundancy |
| **(b) Task (communicative and cognitive processing demands)** | | | |
| 4 **Level of processing:** what should students do with information in the text? At what level must the information be processed? | Descriptive (understanding information as presented) | Restructuring (reorganizing information) | Evaluative (comparing different information sources) |
| 5 **Modality:** how should students provide their answers or produce the outcome? | Non-verbal reaction (purely receptive) | Limited verbal reaction (writing/talking at copying level) | Verbal reaction (talking or writing at descriptive level) |

**Figure 1**   Complexity scale used for sequencing reception-based language tasks (and opposite)

| (c) Text | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 6 **Vocabulary:** is the vocabulary used highly frequent or not? | Highly frequent words | Less frequent words | Infrequent words |
| 7 **Syntax:** are the sentences simple or complex? | Short, simple sentences | Reasonably long sentences with juxtaposition | Long, embedded sentences |
| 8 **Text structure:** is the text clearly/ explicitly structured? | Structure is explicit and clear | Structure only partly explicit | Structure is left implicit |
| 9 **Text length:** is the text short or long? | Short | Reasonably long | Long |

Each of these categories is set on a three-point scale, ranging from simple (1) to complex (3). 'Simple' and 'complex' have to be conceived as relative terms: the 'complex' end refers to the ultimate level of proficiency that has to be attained by the newcomer (target level), in this case towards the end of the reception year. In other words, needs analysis in terms of what pupils should be able to do with language at the end of the course not only informs the contents of a task-based syllabus, but also the two ends of the complexity scale along which tasks are ordered (see also Chapter 2 in this volume).

Parameters 1–3 together constitute the category 'world'. The first parameter describes the perspective from which the topic (the 'world') is presented in the text. We did not include a parameter dealing with the level of abstraction of the topic itself (e.g. 'the structure of the brain' versus 'my cat'), because newcomers are not confronted with abstract topics as such, but only with texts on concrete topics (e.g. 'cats') that may include more abstract, general insights, and descriptions that go beyond directly observable, physical action. The first parameter, then, distinguishes, in ascending level of complexity, texts dealing with the topic in a 'here-and-now' context (e.g. 'what does my cat like to eat?'), in a 'there-and-then-context' (e.g. 'what were cats used for in ancient Egypt?') and from a more abstract perspective (e.g. 'why are black cats symbols of bad luck?'). Texts at the here-and-now end of the scale are claimed to be easier because they allow the learner more opportunity to relate text content to concrete events and experiences, including personal experience (Candlin, 1987; Prabhu, 1987; Skehan, 1998).

The second parameter describes the degree of visual support that is provided to the learner. Visual support can substantially support the reader in building up a conceptual representation of the world in the text (Ginther, 2002; Nunan, 1989; Robinson *et al*., 1995). To assign texts or tasks a complexity score for this parameter, we do not score the presence of visual support as such, but assess the extent to which visual support may aid the learner to conceptualize the world and perform the task.

The third parameter in this category, 'linguistic context', has to do with the degree of verbal redundancy in the text. Texts can have high information density, obliging the learner to extract much information from relatively little text. At the other end of the scale, texts offer the reader the same information in many different linguistic ways e.g. through the use of paraphrases, examples, synonyms, etc. This parameter, then, has to do with the relationship between the density of information and the linguistic means used to convey the information (Brown *et al*., 1984). Indirect evidence for the relevance of this

parameter can be found in the studies that show that elaborative input is more comprehensible than simplified input (Oh, 2001; Parker & Chaudron, 1987; Yano *et al*., 1994).

Parameters 4 and 5 together constitute the second category 'task: cognitive and communicative processing demands'. The first parameter in this category has to do with the cognitive level at which the information in the text has to be processed. Three levels of information processing are distinguished in our framework: (a) the descriptive level at which the learner has to process the information in the same structure as it is presented, (b) the level at which the learner has to restructure the information provided, and (c) the evaluative level at which the learner has to reflect on the input by comparing the information in the text with information in another text or source (for more information on these processing levels, see Chapter 2 in this volume).

The second parameter in this category, 'modality', describes the way in which the learners should produce their answer or solution. There is a focus on the relative prominence of language here. For instance, tasks that require more verbal output are assumed to be more difficult for newcomers than tasks asking them to simply tick the right box (cf. Prabhu, 1987; Skehan, 2001). In general, productive skills (writing/speaking) are believed to be more demanding for newcomers than receptive skills (reading/listening).

Parameters 6–9 together constitute the third category 'text'. There is considerable debate on whether linguistic parameters should be included in task complexity scales (Robinson, 2001a). Linguistic complexity is thought to be closely related to complexity at the level of the 'world'. For instance, texts that deal with the functions of the brain on an abstract level automatically become complex linguistically, because of the jargon used and the complex relationships that have to be expressed through syntactic structures. We have included this category in our version of the complexity scale, because within the population of newcomers, significant discrepancies are to be expected between their cognitive development and knowledge of the world on the one hand, and their linguistic repertoire in Dutch on the other. For instance, some newcomers may already possess abstract thinking skills as a result of the schooling they enjoyed in their home country, but may lack the language to express them in Dutch. The first parameter in this linguistic category, then, describes the extent to which the 'vocabulary' in the text is included in lists of high-frequency, basic vocabulary of Dutch academic language (i.e. the Dutch vocabulary list compiled by Schrooten, 1997). The parameter 'syntax' is predominantly based on the length of the sentences used.

The parameter 'structure of the text' describes to what degree the text contains explicit and clear markers of the way the text is structured. Finally, the parameter 'text length' is a measure of the relative length of the text.

This complexity scale was used first to describe and manipulate the items in the above-mentioned TASAN test administered at the end of the reception year. The test was intended to contain test items at different levels of difficulty in order to diagnose what kind of tasks newcomers were able to perform at the end of the reception year and which tasks were still beyond their current Dutch language skills. One-parameter Rasch analyses (Baker, 2001) and regression analyses on the pretesting data confirmed that the ease with which the newcomers solved certain items in this test was strongly related to the level of complexity as described by the scales (Gysen & Ramaut, 2003). This applied to each of the three categories. In Figure 2, the relevant correlations are summarized. 'Ease' represents the percentage of pupils scoring an item correctly, while 'difficulty' represents the item logit values in the one-parameter Rasch analysis. 'Complexity' stands for the sum of the parameter values describing complexity (weighted for number of features within parameters), whereas 'world', 'processing' and 'text' stand for the three separate categories of parameters respectively. As Figure 2 summarizes, the category 'cognitive and communicative processing demands' showed the highest correlations (.56 with ease, and .54 with difficulty respectively, $p < .01$). The categories 'world' and 'text' showed high correlations with each other, which substantiates the claim that these two categories are closely related. The regression analysis assigned the explained variance to the category 'world'.

Evidently, task complexity is not exclusively determined by the above-mentioned internal task features. What is required of the learner when asked to perform a functional language task is dependent on a complex interplay of a wide range of variables. Furthermore, as Robinson (2001b) points out, task complexity, which can only account for intra-learner variability (variability following from the same learner performing different tasks) should be distinguished from task difficulty, which is dependent on the resources the individual learner brings to the task (and thus which is needed to account for inter-learner variability).

Nevertheless, as the above-mentioned analyses show, the syllabus designer may, at least to some extent, manipulate the complexity of tasks so as to roughly correspond to a supposed level of required language proficiency. In the next paragraph, we will describe how, in developing task-based materials, syllabus developers can try and

|  | ease | difficulty | complexity | world | processing | text |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ease | | | | | | |
| Pearson | 1 | –.98** | –.54** | –.39** | –.64** | –.38** |
| Sig. | , | .00 | .00 | .00 | .00 | .00 |
| N | 60 | 60 | 60 | 60 | 60 | 60 |
| Difficulty | | | | | | |
| Pearson | ** | 1 | .56 | .43** | .60** | .45** |
| Sig. | | | .00 | .00 | .00 | .00 |
| N | | 60 | 60 | 60 | 60 | 60 |
| Complexity | | | | | | |
| Pearson | ** | ** | 1 | .91** | .67** | .94** |
| Sig. | | | | 00 | .00 | .00 |
| N | | | 60 | 60 | 60 | 60 |
| World | | | | | | |
| Pearson | ** | ** | ** | 1 | .34** | .96** |
| Sig | | | | | .00 | .00 |
| N | | | | 60 | 60 | 60 |
| Processing | | | | | | |
| Pearson | ** | ** | ** | ** | 1 | .44** |
| Sig | | | | | | .00 |
| N | | | | | 60 | 60 |
| Text | | | | | | |
| Pearson | ** | ** | ** | ** | ** | 1 |
| Sig | | | | | | |
| N | | | | | | 60 |

** = correlation is significant at the .01 level.
**Figure 2**    Correlations between level of complexity, difficulty and ease with
regard to test items of TASAN test

make the most of this opportunity by manipulating the parameters in the above-mentioned complexity scale.

## 4 Tasks for absolute beginners

Example 1 on page 59 is a task for absolute beginners, taken from the above-mentioned syllabus for the reception class at the level of secondary education. More specifically, the task is taken from the first part of the syllabus, called '*Klaar? Af!*' (*Ready? Go!*), which contains tasks for the first weeks in the reception class. Tasks in '*Klaar? Af!*' are designed to be feasible for as many newcomers as possible, including those who have not learnt to read and write and

those who have acquired reading and writing skills using a different orthographic system. As a result, the tasks for absolute beginners in '*Klaar? Af!*' do not require reading and writing skills.

In the teacher manual, a procedure is described for handling this task in the classroom. First, the teacher shows the newcomers the two pictures and gives the instruction to look at them carefully so as to spot the differences between them. This instruction must be made accessible to the newcomers with the help of an enlarged copy on the blackboard: the teacher can focus the newcomers' attention on an object that is present in one, but absent in the other picture. The teacher tells the pupils this is a difference and marks this difference on the enlarged copies. Then the teacher instructs the pupils to find and mark other objects that are present in one, but absent in the other picture. When this is the first time a task like this is introduced, a few more differences will be searched for together. At this early stage, many newcomers may only come to understand the task instructions through the demonstration of task performance, rather than through the language in which the instruction is expressed.

When the purpose of the task is clear, the pupils look for other differences individually or in pairs. The teacher follows up on the progress of the pupils and comments on it, again extensively using the drawings to support what she says. Finally, the solutions are checked together, with the teacher allowing the pupils to indicate them on the enlarged copy. The teacher provides language input and feedback by commenting on the pupils' work, again using the drawings and other visual support to make the language input accessible.

In the syllabus teachers are also given an idea of the specific phrases they can use while implementing this task:

> Look at these pictures. Do they resemble each other? Yes, this is a picture of a class with five pupils, and this one too. These are the pupils (*pointing at them*). But the pictures are not completely identical. There are differences too. Look at this book. Does everyone see the book? Where is the book in the other picture? (*pointing at the other picture*) Is the book on the chair? (*pointing at the chair*) No? . . . Right, the book is not on the chair. The chair is empty. I will mark the empty spot with a cross.

Situated at the very beginning of the course, the learning potential of this task is wide and varied: the newcomers are stimulated and aided (e.g. by the visual support) to establish form–meaning mappings at the level of vocabulary and phrases, to set their internal morpho-

**Drawing 1 (Tekening 1)**　　　　　　　　**Drawing 2 (Tekening 2)**



**Example 1**　Spot the differences task taken from a Flemish task-based syllabus for newcomers in secondary education. (From: *Klaar? Af!* Centre for Language and Education, Leuven)

grammatical syllabus running and implicitly develop basic hypotheses (e.g. about word order and the marking of plural and singular in Dutch), to build up a first store of ready-made chunks and to get acquainted with the Dutch phonological system. Below, we will describe the complexity of this task using the parameters described above.

## 4.1 The world in the tasks

The 'world' of the above-mentioned task clearly matches the world of the school: the classroom and its attributes. This world is known at least to some extent by all newcomers, because they are at a Flemish school now, and probably sit in a classroom similar to the one in the picture. The perspective from which this world is presented is at the simple, 'here-and-now' end of the task complexity scale.

Tasks for absolute beginners ideally feature a familiar world they have in common. Using 'worlds' that are familiar to some newcomers and unfamiliar to others may lead to misunderstandings, intercultural miscommunication and prejudices. To ensure a safe learning climate for all learners, we have selected neutral worlds or relatively universal worlds, for instance the world of playing (games, tricks) or of scientific experiments. The worlds chosen are not only determined by the knowledge of the world the students have, they are also meant to fit the relevant language proficiency goals the newcomers have to reach. In the above-mentioned example, the concrete, practical language used at school constitutes important and relevant language input for the newcomers, as it is crucial to promote newcomers' development with regard to social functioning at school. Nevertheless, even during the very first weeks, it will be inevitable that tasks dealing with unfamiliar worlds are introduced, for instance when the newcomers have to learn about possible reasons to go to the secretary's office (which is slightly different for every school).

Even when dealing with worlds that are situated in the here-and-now (e.g. the classroom), contextual support accompanying the language input will be absolutely necessary for comprehension. In Example 1, contextual support is provided in two ways. First, the pictures visualize the world the task is about. The newcomers as well as the teacher can point at the pictures, to illustrate what they are saying or to show the solutions to the task. In this task, additional contextual support is also provided because the teacher and the newcomers can always fall back on their real classroom whenever a problem cannot be solved on the basis of the pictures alone e.g. when the difference between a pencil and a ballpoint is not clear.

Embedding tasks for absolute beginners in the here-and-now of the classroom is an easy way of providing visual contextual support. This can be realized by choosing tasks which involve the use of concrete objects that are present in the classroom or which can be easily introduced. Live-performance – doing everything that is said at the moment at which it is said – also generates immediate and clear contextual support of language input. Other visual materials like pictures and photographs, can also add to the contextualization of the world in the task. When confronting beginning language learners with unfamiliar worlds in tasks, these types of contextual support are essential.

## 4.2 Cognitive and communicative processing demands

In order to complete the task in Example 1, the newcomers primarily have to listen to the teacher. They do not need other language skills. The disadvantage of this is that they may become passive. To avoid this, measures need to be taken to guarantee language learners' active involvement in the task. For instance, they can be asked to demonstrate or show a concrete outcome during, or at the end of, a motivating task. This outcome can involve marking differences between pictures, but it can also be found in the area of handicrafts, tricks and games, scientific tests, movements and so on, as long as the supposed outcome during these first weeks is predominantly non-verbal. This is also illustrated in Example 2 below. In this task the learners are confronted with the teacher's oral instructions that allow them to make their own pen case.

To the syllabus designer, the outcome of the task is not so much an end in itself, but a means to motivate the newcomers to invest intense mental energy in the task and the language use associated with it (Dörnyei, 2002; for a more elaborate discussion of motivation, see Chapter 4 in this volume). As in the case of Example 1, the language learning potential of this task is rich and varied: the newcomers are stimulated and aided (e.g. by the visual support and the link with physical actions) to establish form–meaning mappings at the level of vocabulary and phrases, to set their internal morpho-grammatical syllabus running and implicitly develop basic hypotheses (e.g. basic forms of the verb), to build up a first store of ready-made chunks and to get acquainted with the Dutch phonological system. For the teacher, the extent to which different newcomers reach the intended outcome (did they succeed in making their own pen case?) and the problems they meet on the way with any of the above-mentioned aspects of the task may help them to keep track of how well each of

Show an example of the pen case to the pupils and make clear that they can use it to put in their pens and pencils. When they have made their own pen case, they can put it on their desk.

Give each pupil a page with the visual instructions (see below) and carry out the instructions one by one together with the pupils. Meanwhile provide language input by describing what you are doing:
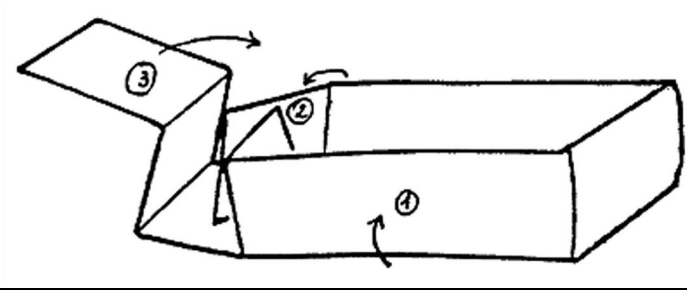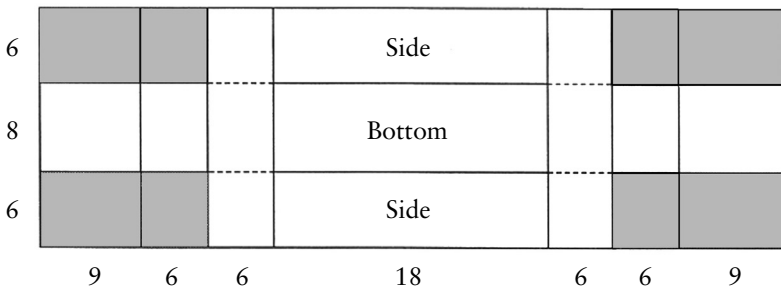
*Draw the plan of the pen case on a sheet of paper.*
*Cut off the grey parts.*
*Cut the parts indicated by a dotted line.*
*Fold the sides upwards, fold the cut pieces and the back and front inwards as indicated on the instructions.*
*Cut out a double bottom and put it in the box.*
*Let the pupils further decorate their own box.*



**Example 2**   Make your own pen case (task taken from the teacher manual of a task-based syllabus for newcomers in Flemish education: *Klaar? Af!* Centre for Language and Education, Leuven)

the students is coping and ascertain whether or not they need to be provided with further support.

The use of tasks eliciting non-verbal involvement allows the newcomers a 'silent period'. Research (see Ellis, 1994 for an overview) has shown that many language learners, especially children, do not spontaneously speak in the second language at first. Different reasons for this are mentioned. Language learners might use this period for building up a receptive base in the new language, which will help them when they start producing language, or language learners need to build up a certain degree of self-confidence in their basic L2 skills before they start producing language. Many syllabuses for beginners, however, do not respect the silent period. Exercises immediately ask for learners' production of language. In the syllabus we have developed, we have taken a different stance: if it is possible to respect the silent period, we will do it. In this way, the needs of individual learners can be catered for much better. The potentially threatening and demotivating effect of forced production must be avoided. Of course, language learners should not be forbidden to speak in the new language. They can do so when they spontaneously want to. Means for integrating learners' speech in tasks for beginners are also specified in the teacher guidelines in the syllabus. In the spot-the-differences task above (Example 1) the teacher is advised to allow the learners who want to speak to verbalize their solutions instead of indicating them on the picture. Non-threatening tasks can help stimulate the reproduction of a number of fixed expressions such as those we use when introducing ourselves, and which are useful to enhance a language learners' fluency (Foster, 2001).

We have not included reading tasks in the materials for the first weeks, because some of the newcomers are illiterate and we do not want to exclude them from active participation. Most tasks leave an option for literate newcomers to read (or write) from the beginning, as the syllabus includes suggestions for differentiation. In the spot-the-differences example, this can be accomplished by writing down the solutions on the blackboard instead of only marking them in the picture. At the same time, illiterate newcomers are gradually prepared for learning to read and write.

The cognitive level of information processing will vary across tasks for the first weeks. Mostly, the language learners have to cope with input at the 'descriptive' level. This is also the case in the 'spot-the-differences' and the 'pen case' tasks. The selected level of processing, however, is largely influenced by the level of complexity of the other features. For instance, when there is a lot of contextual support, processing demands may be raised to a restructuring level.

## 4.3 *Linguistic features*

The language input in the tasks for the first phase contains a lot of instructions and, thus, at the syntactic level, a lot of short sentences containing imperatives like 'Take a piece of paper', 'Attention please! I will show this only once'. Newcomers have to understand this input in order to function in class from the very early stages. At the level of vocabulary, objects that are often used in class and action verbs like 'take, find, mark, raise', as well as adjectives like 'big, small, cold, long', typically belong to basic, highly frequent input. The same language input recurs across tasks in different or similar contexts, providing ample opportunities for the language learners to build/test their interlanguage hypotheses and to automatize L2 knowledge.

## 5  Tasks for more advanced stages

As newcomers progress, task complexity increases. Below are two examples of more advanced tasks for newcomers in the reception class of secondary education: 'Detective story' (Example 3) was designed for newcomers who have enjoyed around 3 to 4 months of education in Dutch, while 'Make-up in Chinese opera' (Example 4) was designed for the end of the reception year. After describing the tasks, we will discuss how complexity was manipulated in order to further promote the newcomers' growing proficiency in Dutch.

Example 3 below (Detective story) is an intermediate task. The newcomers are asked to understand the relevant information in a text in order to solve a riddle. To perform this task, the newcomers have to be able to understand the text in a cartoon about a street mugging and draw conclusions on the identity of the thief.

In Example 3, task performance consists of a number of steps. In a classical introduction the teacher and the pupils first describe what they see in the pictures. On the basis of the pictures alone, they try to speculate on what has happened. Next, they read the text in the cartoon. On the basis of the text and the class discussion, the pupils (individually or in pairs) then try to identify the thieves. The lesson is rounded off with a classical discussion of the solutions the pupils came up with. The language learning potential of this task is situated at various levels. At the sociolinguistic/pragmatic level, the pupils are granted the opportunity to develop their speaking proficiency, primarily in terms of fluency and complexity. At the lexical level, pupils are supported to consolidate form–meaning mappings or to establish new ones, the task giving them the opportunity to recycle much of the vocabulary during the various stages of the task and

**Example 3** Detective story (a task taken from a task-based syllabus for newcomers in Flemish education: *Klaar? Af!* Centre for Language and Education, Leuven) (see also overleaf)
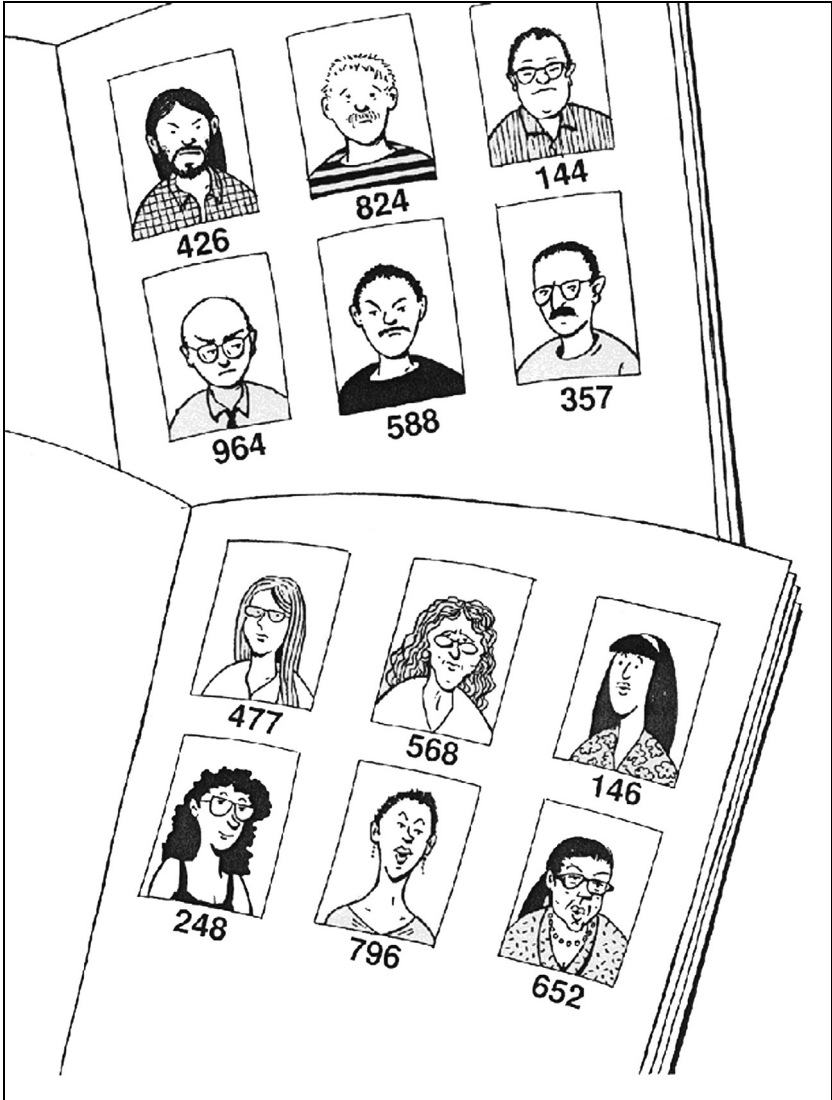
offering them visual support to unravel the meaning of new words and phrases. At the morpho-grammatical level, this task may, among others, draw the learner's attention to the formation of the negative in Dutch, especially when the students are asked to match the descriptions with the cartoons and draw conclusions on the identity of the thief.

Read the following text and try to find out about the personality of the characters that you have made up. Write down the most striking personality traits next to the faces on the dotted lines.

## *The meaning of make-up in Chinese opera*

In Chinese opera the characters are completely made up. This make-up is not only used to make the actor more beautiful or more visible on the stage. No. The make-up also tells the audience a lot about the person that the actor is playing. The make-up has been selected according to a set of rules that are known to the audience and the actors.

First of all there is the choice of colours. An actor who uses white for his face, plays a character that commits treason. The use of black refers to righteousness and honesty. When the face of the actor is made up in blue, this means that the character is brave or arrogant, or even both. The use of yellow is linked with calculation. This means that the character tries to assess in advance the consequences of his deeds. Everything he does is done with a particular intention, with a particular goal in mind. When green make-up is used, then the character is proud.

Not only the colours provide a lot of information on the character. Also the pattern in which the colours are shaped, reveals a lot. For instance, for noble characters, simple patterns, in addition to sober colours, are allowed. Asymmetric make-up points to a bad character. The make-up is asymmetric when one side of the face is made up in a different way from the other side. The pattern also tells the audience whether a character is violent or not: the more complicated the pattern, the more violent the character.

**Example 4**    Make-up in Chinese opera (task taken from a task-based syllabus for newcomers in Flemish education: *Klaar? Af!* Centre for Language and Education, Leuven)

Example 4 (Make-up in Chinese opera) is an advanced task. The newcomers are asked to extract relevant information from a rather abstract text in order to unravel the meaning of a strange picture. To do so, they have to read at the restructuring level. The lesson is opened with a short class discussion about theatres in the newcomers' countries of birth. The teacher also asks whether masks are used in theatre and what meaning they have. Next, the pupils are given three drawings of the face of a Chinese actor. Using a key, they have to colour the drawing. This is followed by a classical brainstorm on the meaning of the colours with which the actors have been made up. The clue to the mystery can be found in the text 'Make-up in Chinese opera'. The pupils are asked to read the text in silence and to find out (individually or in pairs) what characters the actors are playing. The solutions the pupils arrive at are discussed in class afterwards. With regard to language learning potential, this task confronts the learners with new vocabulary and phrases. Furthermore, since this text calls for reading at a restructuring level, it may give rise to the learners' noticing morpho-grammatical markings and rules for embedded clauses and relative clauses, and to pay attention to the way Dutch links between sentences and clauses can be marked explicitly and implicitly. On the pragmatic level, this task challenges learners to cope with more elaborate sources of information and to establish links between information bits that are scattered over various parts of the text.

## 5.1  The world in the tasks

In contrast to Example 2, Examples 3 and 4 move away from the concrete, familiar classroom surroundings. The pupils are confronted with a world that is beyond the here-and-now: the detective story is situated in a so-called 'there-and-then-world', while the text on Chinese opera confronts the newcomers with an unknown world that is approached from an abstract perspective. The confrontation with these kinds of tasks requires a higher level of language proficiency, because these worlds (especially the latter) are almost completely represented by language alone. The newcomers' class and school now offer little contextual support. This increase in complexity is necessary to prepare newcomers for the kinds of language tasks that they will face upon leaving the reception class.

Clearly, the shift towards gradually more abstract and unfamiliar worlds necessitates the presence of linguistic and non-linguistic contextual support other than the one directly available in the classroom surroundings. In Example 3, a comic allows the learners to

easily visualize the storyline. In fact, the visual support is quite considerable in this task, because the requirements with regard to other parameters, such as speaking skills and reading at a restructuring level, have moved to the complex end of the scale. For less advanced pupils, the contextual support can be elaborated upon by looking for, and pointing at, pupils in the class who share the same features (e.g. long black hair, glasses) as the characters in the story, thus providing a 'here-and-now translation' of the 'there-and-then world' in the text.

In Example 4, the degree of visual support is even more limited. The drawing the newcomers have to colour following the instructions does not support reading comprehension. At the most, the newcomers can formulate a number of hypotheses on the personage's character, taking into account that this interpretation may be culturally biased and has to be tested against the information in the text. This example does not imply that tasks for the end of the reception year necessarily offer little contextual support. For some tasks, a high degree of contextual degree will be needed to compensate for other complex task features. Reading comprehension tasks at the evaluative level, in which the pupils each have to read an abstract text, have to compare the information in their text with the information in other texts and, by way of conclusion, have to express orally and defend their own opinion, require visual support to avoid the gap between task demands and the learners' current language proficiency from becoming too wide and hence demotivating. Every time newcomers are confronted with difficulties they have not met in previous tasks, for instance at the processing level or at the level of language skill, contextual support will be of immense help.

Apart from visual support, the linguistic context may also support the newcomers to comprehend the input. This can be done by embedding unfamiliar, infrequent or new words in a context of frequent and familiar words, and by making the text sufficiently redundant (using repetitions, paraphrases, examples, etc.). In Example 3, the linguistic context can be made highly supportive by having the learners only answer closed questions ('Does he have long black hair? Does she wear glasses?'), which implies that they do not have to come up with a creative or elaborate answer themselves, but only have to reproduce the correct one. Reading the text in the comic is prepared by a brainstorm during which the pictures are discussed in detail.

In Example 4, there is less linguistic support and redundancy, in line with the increase in task complexity intended by the task designer. In this task, the pupils can fall back on a number of key

terms that were dealt with in the introduction (like the colours and the possible meaning of symbols), but they are confronted with a lot of new information and new linguistic elements while reading the text. In addition to the support built into the task by the syllabus designer, clearly the way in which the teacher motivates and supports the learners while performing the task is crucial to allow newcomers to learn from the difficulties this task offers. Separate chapters on the teacher's supportive role are included in this volume (see Chapters 8 and 9).

## 5.2  Cognitive and communicative processing demands

Tasks for the advanced stages of the reception class require the newcomers to engage in oral interaction as active speakers. While the teacher took most of the speaking turns during the first weeks, advanced tasks are designed to elicit more output from the pupils, both in quantitative and qualitative terms. In Example 3, the pupils are asked to describe the story line on the basis of what they see in the pictures. The teacher stimulates the pupils' production by asking relevant questions. These questions offer the pupils 'scaffolds' that can be useful in the brainstorm and post-task discussion. In both examples, speaking is elicited in the post-task phase, when the pupils are asked to verbalize their possible solutions. At this stage, the pupils can fall back on the learner interactions that preceded, when they could support each other by trying to express what they meant, push each other's language output and the teacher could do the same in small groups.

Gradually, in the syllabus, more emphasis is put on open and more complex production. Newcomers are asked to elaborate on their own experiences, to express their own opinion on a particular topic or to verbalize possible explanations for a scientific phenomenon. Learner interaction becomes more prominent. Group work and pair work offer the learners ample opportunities to talk and discuss, to share, negotiate and exchange information.

Likewise, requirements in terms of reading skills are gradually built up. In the early weeks, written text is included systematically in the form of titles or short instructions, but these texts are not essential for coping with the task. In a later stage, reading tasks are granted a more important, but still non-essential role. For instance, in one of the intermediate tasks in the syllabus, the pupils have to conduct a scientific experiment. In the introduction, they are given a list of ingredients which they have to check. Conducting the experiment is not dependent on the reading of the list. However, in

Examples 3 and 4, reading comprehension has become a crucial component of task performance: the learners have to read balloons in a cartoon or an abstract text on Chinese masks to solve the problem at hand. To support less skilled readers, a more advanced reader or the teacher can read the text aloud and support reading comprehension. Similar to speaking, the introduction of reading tasks is gradual. The goals at this level evolve from the mere recognition of word forms to the global understanding of short texts, to extracting particular information from a longer text containing a lot of unfamiliar material.

With regard to processing levels, advanced tasks are no longer restricted to the descriptive level of processing. In some tasks, the learners have to select specific information, restructure the text or evaluate the contents by comparing it to information in other sources. Again, this prepares them for real-life academic tasks in the regular curriculum. As can be deduced from the examples above, the syllabus designer should manipulate the processing level on the basis of the level of complexity of the other parameters. To the reader, it must be clear by now that task 4 is a complex task: the learners have to extract relevant information from an abstract text and use this to interpret mysterious drawings without being able to fall back on much contextual support.

Together, the examples show how the different parameters that constitute task complexity can be manipulated separately with a view to gradually increasing task complexity and keeping the learning potential of the tasks intact, while making sure that the gap between the learners' current level of language proficiency and the level demanded by the task does not become too wide. As such, a gradual approximation of the cognitive complexity of the final target tasks can be arrived at.

## 6 Sequencing tasks after the reception year

After the newcomers have finished their reception year, they are supposed to enrol in mainstream primary and secondary education. At this point, they join the students who have been attending Dutch medium education from kindergarten onwards. Sterckx (2003, 2005) conducted empirical research on the degree of academic success and failure of newcomers after their first reception year in Flemish secondary schools. In this study, 113 newcomers were followed, 66 of whom intensively through a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods. The students and their teachers were interviewed, and the students' academic results on the different

subjects in the curriculum were analysed. The results of the study show that the newcomers' educational success was highly dependent on the extent to which they had already enjoyed formal education before they came to Flanders, the extent to which they were supported in mainstream education from the second year on, and the level of Dutch language proficiency that they developed during the first reception year. With regard to the latter, Sterckx established that the newcomers' academic results in the mainstream class were strongly linked with their scores on the TASAN test administered at the end of the reception year. This empirically underpins the predictive validity of the test. Correlations between test scores and the pupils' academic results were particularly high for the course of Dutch and for courses like science and technology, involving the intensive use of academic language. For practical courses (such as vocational training), correlations were not significant. On the whole, the newcomers did rather poorly in their post-reception year. Of the 66 newcomers that were followed-up intensively, only 17 were allowed to pass to the next grade in the academic strand of secondary education, while another 19 students were allowed to pass to the next grade in the vocational strand of secondary education. The other students were not allowed to pass to a next grade in the same strand. This strongly indicates that for many newcomers one reception year does not suffice to properly prepare them to integrate into mainstream education (cf. Short & Boyson, 2004) and/or that teachers in mainstream education insufficiently cater for the specific second language learning needs of the newcomers.

Moreover, in secondary education the problem of underachievers is not restricted to ex-newcomers. Research involving students who have been enlisted in Flemish Dutch-medium education from kindergarten (Bogaert, 2000) indicates that at the beginning of secondary education, there are still significant differences among students' levels of Dutch academic language proficiency. Students with a low socioeconomic status (SES) profile and those speaking a mother tongue other than Dutch at home scored significantly lower on a task-based academic language proficiency test than native-speaker (NS) students with a high SES-profile and those speaking Dutch as their mother tongue. The Flemish Ministry of Education provides extra funding to Educational Priority Policy (EPP) secondary schools with a relatively high percentage of low SES and non-native-speaker pupils so that these schools can organize intensive language programmes that will allow the students in question to catch up with their peers and develop the Dutch academic language proficiency demanded by the secondary school. The Ministry of Education has also financed the

development of a task-based syllabus (called SESAM) that supports EPP schools to run this intensive Dutch language programme.

In general, the way task complexity is handled in this syllabus strongly resembles the way it was manipulated in the task-based syllabuses for the reception year. The basic idea is that at the beginning of the school year, secondary schools administer the task-based academic language proficiency test in order to establish the width of the gap between the average language proficiency required in the first year of secondary education (criterion performance), and their students' actual language proficiency. The wider the gap, the stronger the recommendation that the school set up a compensatory language programme during all available lessons of Dutch throughout the whole school year. In the course of this school year, the students would work their way through the different stages of the syllabus volume by volume. With each volume, tasks become increasingly complex, as schematized in Figure 3.

The table in Figure 3 should not be interpreted too strictly: the first volumes also contain tasks that are more complex with regard to some of the parameters than the 'standard' tasks that are described above. However, the pupils are only confronted with these more complex tasks after they have tackled easier tasks on the same, or a similar, topic.

## 7 Conclusions

In this article we have presented a set of task features that may be used by syllabus designers to develop and sequence tasks intended to promote academic language proficiency. The world as presented in the task, the level of processing that is demanded and a number of linguistic aspects have been shown to influence the ease with which the language learner will be able to perform a task. By manipulating tasks along these different variables, task complexity can, at least to some extent be controlled and manipulated. This allows the syllabus designer to gradually increase task complexity and to cater for the learners' continuous need to be confronted with tasks that provide new challenges and, therefore, new opportunities to develop their receptive and productive skills.

Although empirical support for the predictive validity of the chosen parameters was found, describing task complexity remains a speculative endeavour. To a great extent, the difficulty that the learner will experience when tackling language tasks will be determined by the learners themselves. The learners' motivation to do the task and persist, their personal knowledge of the world, the state of

| Volume 1 | Most of the tasks involve:<br>• action tasks in the here-and-now<br>• relatively short texts, predominantly stories<br>• topical coherence between texts<br>• descriptive level of information processing<br>• global comprehension required, not all the difficult words need to be understood or acquired |
|---|---|
| Volume 2 | • stories used as the introduction of informative texts<br>• topical coherence between texts<br>• intensive peer interaction: joint problem-solving, comparing solutions, information exchange, etc.<br>• descriptive level, and occasionally restructuring level of information processing<br>• attention drawn to relevant words and forms |
| Volume 3 | • stories used as the introduction to more and longer informative texts<br>• topical coherence between texts<br>• intensive peer interaction: joint problem-solving, comparing solutions, information exchange, etc.<br>• restructuring level of information processing<br>• attention drawn to relevant words and forms |
| Volumes 4 and 5 | • informative texts predominate<br>• restructuring and evaluative level of information processing<br>• learners have to reflect on contents of different texts, select information from a broad range of sources, compare information, reflect on them, etc.<br>• intensive peer interaction<br>• attention drawn to relevant words and forms |

**Figure 3**   Complexity of tasks in the different volumes of SESAM (a task-based syllabus for Dutch language teaching in Flemish secondary education)

their interlanguage development and the way in which the teacher and the students set up meaningful interaction will very often over-rule the syllabus designer's bold predictions.

However, this does not absolve the syllabus designer from coping with the sequencing issue. The parameters presented in this article may constitute a workable set for syllabus designers to make objective assessments of the complexity of individual tasks and to be systematic in doing so across the many tasks that together constitute a task-based syllabus. It will be up to the teacher, then, to fine-tune these assessments to the activities and experiences of individual

learners. For teachers, the same set of parameters may constitute a workable set of features they can manipulate 'on the spot' in order to achieve fully the task's learning potential for the individual language learner (for more details on how this can be done, see Chapters 8 and 9 in this volume).

# 4 Developing language tasks for primary and secondary education

Koen Van Gorp and Nora Bogaert

This chapter focuses on the design of tasks, more specifically on the manipulation of task features believed to enhance language learning. We will demonstrate our case by referring to and drawing examples from task-based syllabuses that were developed for Dutch language education in primary and secondary education. The tasks in these syllabuses aim to support the students in acquiring the Dutch academic language proficiency needed to be successful at a Dutch-medium primary or secondary school. In describing the tasks, we will discuss the main task features enhancing language learning and also illustrate how classroom activities can be constructed around tasks. Reference will also be made to research studies that empirically substantiate the choices that we advocate.

## 1 Introduction

As pupils pursue their academic career, the linguistic demands of the school system that they are confronted with gradually increase. The language proficiency needed to understand the teachers' input in primary and secondary schools, aimed at transmitting subject content and enhancing the development of academic skills, knowledge and attitudes, strongly differs from the language pupils use in everyday situations outside school (e.g. Hodson, 1998; Mohan, 1986; Valdés, 2004) (for a more detailed discussion of the specific features of academic language at school, see also Chapter 5 in this volume). For instance, in classrooms, conversations are typically about abstract topics that are not present in the 'here-and-now'. Language input is often not embedded in, or does not refer to, concrete situations. Academic text tends to be decontextualized and cognitively demanding (Cummins, 2001). In many cases, students are exclusively dependent on language to interpret the message that is conveyed. To understand academic input, the students have to acquire extensive vocabulary and syntactic skills and sophisticated reading and listening comprehension skills. Producing the necessary academic language is also very demanding for the learner: messages have to be encoded

in academic terms, requiring the use of abstract or specialist terminology and syntactic structures that express complex relationships (Lemke, 1990).

Furthermore, to acquire new subject matter, pupils are not only expected to understand and (re)produce language, but also to process new information, adding this to their existing knowledge base, and making it available for future use or to use it as a scaffold for further cognitive development (Grabe & Stoller, 1997). This presupposes a complex range of mental operations in which language plays a determinant role – from solving problems and drawing tables, to writing summaries and producing convincing arguments (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994; Huang, 2004).

In many primary and secondary schools around the world, language courses are organized to develop students' academic language skills. To this end, the medium of instruction is also taught as a subject. For instance, in Flanders, task-based syllabuses for the teaching of Dutch as a second language were developed by professional syllabus developers at the Centre for Language and Education (University of Leuven) in order to support primary and secondary school pupils to develop academic language skills in the main medium of instruction (e.g. Bogaert & Goossens, 1992, 1994; Bogaert *et al*., 2000; Jaspaert, 1996c). The development of these syllabuses was based upon the following principles:

1 Task-based syllabus development started from a detailed description of the official attainment targets, issued by the Ministry of Education, regarding Dutch academic language proficiency, with a view to determining curriculum goals. It also used an analysis of the linguistic features of the Dutch academic language used by teachers in Flemish classrooms and included in syllabuses across the curriculum. Together, these two sources led to a detailed set of goals, which were described in terms of the language tasks that pupils should be able to perform in order to function as successful learners in Flemish schools (for more details on target task description and needs analysis see also Chapter 2 in this volume). The syllabuses were task-based in the sense that 'tasks' were used as the basic unit for describing the goals of the syllabus.

2 In terms of pedagogical methodology i.e. *how* to stimulate pupils to develop the academic language proficiency needed to perform well at school, tasks had to be devised so as to maximally foster language acquisition. The syllabuses started from the premise that learners learn to perform communicative language tasks by trying to perform these very tasks, by engaging in meaningful language

use and receiving interactional support while doing so. In other words, 'tasks' were also the basic unit for the classroom activities the syllabuses were supposed to give rise to.

3  The syllabuses were intended for use in mainstream classes of official Flemish education in which both L1 speakers of Dutch and L2 speakers (i.e. children born in Flanders but speaking a mother tongue other than Dutch) were present. In line with international research into the effectiveness of education for minority groups (e.g. Thomas & Collier, 2000; Nicaise, 2001), official Flemish educational policy does not support the practice of special pull-out classes for non-native speakers of Dutch, but strongly encourages the integration of native and non-native speakers throughout mainstream official education. A one-year transition class is available, but only for newcomers who arrive at a later age in Flemish education (for more details see Chapter 3 in this volume). After the first year however, these newcomers are also integrated into the mainstream classes.

The combination of these three principles led to a set of key features characterizing what was considered to be a suitable task in the syllabuses. This set of features was used as a criterion checklist by the syllabus developers. In the paragraphs below, these key features will be described and illustrated.

## 2 Task features enhancing language learning

The first example in Figure 1 comes from a task-based syllabus for primary education (Jaspaert, 1996c). This is a writing task for children in the second year (aged 7–8). In the introduction to this task, the pupils have experienced that whenever they have a personal problem, they can write a letter to a children's magazine, so that other children can reply. This writing task is part of a larger theme, including 15 tasks all having to do with helping people.

The pupils are asked to read the 'letters containing a personal problem'. Their task is to try and come up with a solution to each of these problems. The pupils work together in groups of six. Following the group work, each member of the group is assigned one of the six letters and has to write down the reply individually. Altogether, for 7-year-olds this is a complex language task in which they have to speak and listen while discussing possible solutions, as well as read and write. The four language skills are addressed in an integrated way in this task, just as they often are in day-to-day communicative situations in which people have to use language.

| Help! | |
|---|---|
| **Angry**<br>I am a girl of eleven. When I can't work something out, I tend to get very angry. Then I start kicking things around. Who can help me stop doing this? | **Nailbiting**<br>I always bite my nails. I bite them all day long. My nails are very short. I have already put some stuff on them. It tasted bad, but it didn't work. Who knows what I should do? |
| **Sweets**<br>I eat a lot of sweets, even though my mum and dad tell me not to. My teeth are rotten. But I like it so much. Sometimes I search the whole house for sweets. This has to stop. Can anybody help me? | **Pet**<br>I want to have a pet, like a cat or a dog. But I can't have one. Sob! Sob! What can I do to convince my parents? |
| **Going to bed**<br>I always have to go to bed at 8 o'clock. All the other kids in my class stay up until 8.30 pm. I hate it. Who can help me? | **Dreams**<br>I have the same dream every night. A creepy person follows me. I start running. And just when the creepy person has almost caught me, I wake up. When I wake up, I am very frightened. Who can help me? |

**Figure 1**   Writing task (six children calling out for help). Taken from a task-based syllabus for Dutch language learning in the second grade of primary school. (From: *Toren van Babbel*, Wolters/ Plantyn)

## 2.1  Language as a means . . .

In the 'Help-task', the pupils read the six letters not so much to analyse syntactically the language that their fictitious peers have used, nor with a view to discovering which words are new and thus have to be learnt. The pupils read these letters to find out what personal problems their peers are struggling with. They are primarily interested in message content. In other words, for the pupils, language is a means to reach the functional goal of the task. When they perform these kinds of tasks, they are not exclusively, or even consciously, dealing with language as form. They are primarily concerned with understanding and functioning in the aspects of life they are being presented with (in this case, the commonplace personal problems of 7-year-old children). In Wells' (1986: 215) terms, they are 'active meaning makers'. Clearly, while reading the letters with

that particular goal in mind, they process language from a formal point of view as well. For instance, they may have to think aloud about the meaning of a particular word in order to understand the message. And if they want to reply to the letters, they will need to consider formal aspects again. The pupils have to come up with a solution to the problems at hand and express these solutions, making use of adequate linguistic means. They will have to match function with form. Nevertheless, paying some, even if temporary, attention to form does serve the overriding goal of 'meaning making'.

This functional approach contrasts quite strongly with more traditional language exercises that explicitly focus children's attention on the linguistic code. Appel (1996: 35), evaluating the education of Dutch as a subject in the Netherlands in the early 1990s, observed that:

> the methodological format predominates in language exercises … Language methods are full of lessons in which words are turned about, composite nouns are combined incorrectly, or spaces are deleted in isolated sentences leading to a long and obscure string of letters. Quite often, syllabus designers try to present these exercises in an original or funny way, but this is pure show.                              (our translation)

In other words, formal language education tends to focus on linguistic knowledge as a goal in itself, leaving it up to the learner to create or search for opportunities for their functional use. This may be counterintuitive to the learner, and even counterproductive:

> the young child does not encounter language as an isolated phenomenon but, rather, within the rich context provided by the social interaction that takes place between child and adult. … The close relationship between the social context and the language the child hears, assists the child in 'cracking the code' of language.
> (Harris, 1993: 29, describing Jerome Bruner's view)

For most (young) language learners, using language and learning language are inextricably entwined with exploring the world, manipulating the world, getting personal jobs done and interconnecting with other people (Donaldson, 1978; Ritchie and Bathia, 1999; Tomasello, 2003; Verhelst, 2004). In fact, the individual's desire to reach these essentially non-linguistic goals and the extent to which they have been able, or unable, to reach these in the past, is what drives them, consciously or unconsciously, to make mental efforts with a view to acquiring language.

## 2.2 ... to reach a motivating goal

Willis (1996: 11) distinguishes three essential conditions for language learning:

a *exposure* to rich but comprehensible input of real spoken and written language in use;
b *use* of the language;
c *motivation* to listen and read the language and to speak and write it.

With regard to the third condition, Van Lier (1996: 98) claims that 'experts and amateurs alike, agree unanimously that motivation is a very important, if not *the* most important factor in language learning'.

Following Gardner's seminal work (Gardner & Lambert, 1959; Gardner, 1985), motivation is usually referred to as a general attitude towards learning the target language. However, next to this reasonably stable disposition ('trait motivation'), Tremblay *et al.* (1995) also distinguish 'state motivation', which refers to a far more transitory and temporary response to local language learning conditions. In a task-based context, the latter type of 'motivation' (MacIntyre *et al.*, 2001; Peirce, 1994; Ellis, 2003) refers to the learner's willingness to invest mental energy into performing particular language learning tasks, and thus into trying to comprehend the language input and/or produce the language related to performing a task. In this vein, Dörnyei (2001a,b, 2002) advocates a process-oriented approach that looks at the dynamic motivational processes that take place during task completion.

This type of motivation is a complex phenomenon. It is, among other variables, influenced by learner characteristics and beliefs (such as their expectations of success at task completion), the learning environment (support or hindrance), features of the task and the behaviour of the teachers and learners during the performance of a task. In TBLT motivation is highly dynamic in nature. It follows the wobbly track of task performance and, at the same time, influences it. From a process-oriented point of view, Dörnyei (2002) recognizes three distinct phases of the motivational process:

a In the *preactional* stage, motivation needs to be generated. In this stage, learners need to set clear goals for themselves and have to 'launch' into action.
b During the *actional* stage, the generated motivation needs to be actively maintained and protected. Based on an ongoing appraisal of the incoming stimuli from the environment and the progress

made towards task completion, the learner will need to regulate, enhance and protect further action.

c Finally, in the *postactional* stage, learners evaluate their past experiences in order to determine the kind of activities they will be motivated to carry out in the future.

From the above, it can be inferred that tasks will work best to the extent that they inspire the learner to work i.e. to invest mental energy in task performance and to persist, even if the task is complex or difficult. The learner has to keep task performance going. The motivation to perform a task should therefore preferably be learner-intrinsic, rather than the kind of 'surrogate motivation' created by gimmicks, grades and superficial devices that Van Lier (1996: 121) claims education is heavily polluted by. One of the syllabus designer's primary ambitions when developing tasks, then, should be to create tasks that pupils *want* to perform and bring to a good end, for this may be one of the best guarantees that, provided language use is necessary to perform the task, the pupils will try and cope with the linguistic demands posed by the task.

Evidently, the syllabus designer has to recognize that he cannot control the complete motivational process comprising the three stages mentioned above. Further, the extent to which motivation will be maintained will be strongly influenced by the learner's interaction with other task participants (Noels *et al.*, 1999; Dörnyei, 2002; see also Chapters 8 and 9 of this volume on the teacher's role in maintaining the learner's motivation). Nonetheless, syllabus designers can make a strong contribution towards raising the motivational power of tasks.

The letters from the children's magazine in Figure 1 provide an example of a language task that has high potential for fascinating and intrinsically motivating the pupils, and thus launching them into action in the preactional stage. The letters are about real, recognizable problems such as having to go to bed early, having bad dreams or longing for a pet. The pupils may have these problems themselves or they might have friends who do. This may motivate them to discuss possible solutions to these problems in their groups and to try and come up with proper answers in their replies. This kind of interest may arouse more intensive mental energy than the extrinsic motivation arising from the teacher's rewards and sanctions. Implementation studies carried out by the syllabus developers, in which tasks like this one were tried out by teachers and learners and commented upon (e.g. Duran, 1994; Linsen, 1994; Timmermans, 2005), confirm the strong motivational power of such tasks.

As the feedback and teacher logs in these implementation studies testify, games, quizzes, detective stories, riddles and scientific tests often appeal to young learners at first glance. In terms of content, tasks should focus on a topic or idea that captivates the learners' interest (Boeckaerts & Boscolo, 2002). In one of the task-based syllabuses we developed for primary school, the pupils, upon turning the wheel of a time machine, found a mysterious message consisting of three words: 'great, green and extinct'. The teacher asked the children to come up with ideas for what the message could be about and to bring relevant information to the classroom. Most of the pupils guessed correctly and the next day brought to school a pile of books, toys and other things relating to dinosaurs.

Fascinating topics may be combined with goal-oriented processing demands in order to activate learners and give them interesting problems. For instance, 10-year-olds may be asked to read various pseudo-scientific texts in order to evaluate different hypotheses on how dinosaurs disappeared from the earth. Problem-solving tasks may also turn less interesting content into fascinating business. Reading academic texts about moles may be less interesting than reading texts on dinosaurs, but when a text about moles is accompanied by a task with an interesting goal, the learners' innate curiosity and, consequently, their motivation to read the text may be enhanced. Suppose, for instance, strange footprints have been found near a bed of lettuce. Someone has eaten the lettuce. Do the footprints belong to a mole? Does a mole eat lettuce? Such problem-solving tasks may increase learners' goal-orientedness (Dörnyei, 1994; Schmidt *et al.*, 1996; Schumann, 1998; Tremblay & Gardner, 1995) and promote learners' autonomy in finding solutions to the problem. They can enhance learners' self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Vallerand, 1997) and self-regulatory strategies (Dörnyei, 2001b) that, in turn, have a positive impact on the learner's motivation.

Another way of enhancing the motivational power of tasks is to embed them in a story line (Letschert, 1995). Story lines can be constructed around one particular task or around a number of tasks e.g. the time machine 'transporting' the children to various periods in history or the disappearance of a fictitious personage, challenging the pupils to collect clues by performing a variety of language tasks (was X perhaps eaten by a mole?). Task performance conditions, such as allowing pupils to cooperate while performing the task, can also add to the motivational power of tasks (Dörnyei, 1997; see also section 2.5 below).

## 2.3  Tasks involving relevant and natural language

Reading children's letters and trying to find out how dinosaurs became extinct may be great fun, but are such tasks really relevant to the pupils' language learning needs? In addition to raising their motivational power, syllabus developers also need to take care that the pedagogical tasks they develop have a clear link with the target tasks learners are supposed to be able to perform. The general principles for linking pedagogical tasks to target tasks are discussed at length in Chapter 2 of this volume. Below, we will briefly describe how we went about establishing this link for the primary school syllabus for Dutch as a second language from which Example 1 was taken.

### 2.3.1  Needs analysis of academic language

Two anchors were used in order to ensure the goal relevance of the tasks in the primary school syllabus. First of all, since the Flemish primary schools using the syllabus were Dutch-medium state schools, the tasks needed to work towards the official attainment targets for Dutch academic language learning issued by the Flemish Ministry of Education. These goals describe what pupils must be able to do with, and know about, the Dutch language by the end of primary school (Departement Onderwijs, 1998) and at the end of the different grades of secondary education (Departement Onderwijs, 2002). These official attainment targets also took 'task' as the basic unit of description. Four parameters for describing tasks were used: (a) which *skill* pupils must master; (b) at which *level of cognitive processing* (see Chapters 2 and 3 in this volume); (c) involving which *type of texts*; (d) for which *public/audience*?

Secondly, a corpus study of the actual linguistic demands posed by Flemish teachers in classroom interaction was conducted (Jaspaert, 1996a; Schrooten, 1997). To investigate what kind of language pupils have to understand and produce at school, a large sample of the oral language used by teachers in the classroom and a corpus of texts in handbooks which were used in Flemish classrooms at that time were analysed. The corpus involved both language used in language lessons and in other subjects (mathematics, history, geography, religion, etc.). The corpus was analysed at the levels of vocabulary, syntax, morphology and language functions. Vocabulary was analysed in terms of frequency and spread in order to find out which words were typical for each grade.

Together, the official attainment goals and the analysis of academic

language in Flemish schools provided workable parameters for establishing the relevance of the language tasks in the task-based syllabus. For instance, the task involving children's personal letters (Figure 1) can be considered highly relevant, because pupils have to read (*skill*) letters (*text type*) from unfamiliar peers (*public*) on a descriptive level (*level of processing*). This is a task they have to be able to perform according to the attainment goals. When the pupils reply, they have to write (*skill*) a letter (*text type*) to unfamiliar peers (*public*) on a restructuring level (*level of processing*).

For the syllabus designers, the official attainment targets constituted a checklist in devising appropriate tasks. The corpus-based study of academic language supplemented an instrument for a post-hoc analysis at the micro level of linguistic elements. For instance, it allowed for a comparison of the vocabulary in a task with the vocabulary that was typical of classroom instruction in the corresponding school year. In a similar vein, the parameters used for the description of the attainment targets combined with the linguistic parameters could also be used to assess and manipulate the relative complexity of the tasks throughout the curriculum of the different school years (for more details on sequencing tasks, see Chapter 3 in this volume).

This interpretation of what constitutes relevant language tasks contrasts with courses in which the relevance of language input and output is mainly determined by the chosen theme (e.g. 'autumn', 'clothing') or with structure-based methods, where language tasks are devised to elicit and highlight, often in quite unnatural ways, specific target language rules. In TBLT form follows function. Linguistic forms are dealt with not as a goal in their own right, but because they are naturally entwined with functional language use in certain tasks. The task-based syllabus designer's main concern is not whether the linguistic elements in the tasks are relevant. His first concern lies with the sampling and selection of relevant tasks. While performing these tasks, the learner will have to deal with relevant language. In other words, linguistic elements derive their relevance from belonging in a natural way to the performance of relevant tasks.

## 2.3.2 *Pedagogical tasks as stepping stones*

Combining the attainment goals with the detailed description of language use on the basis of a corpus study also allows for the deduction of pedagogical tasks from real target tasks. Long (Long & Crookes, 1993) views pedagogical tasks as a stepping stone towards the performance of target tasks:

> They [pedagogic tasks] will be increasingly accurate approx-
> imations (according to criteria such as communicative
> success, semantic accuracy, pragmatic appropriacy, and even
> grammatical correctness) to the target tasks . . . . Since target
> tasks will usually be more complex than their related
> pedagogic tasks, increasingly accurate approximation will
> normally imply students addressing increasingly complex
> pedagogical tasks.                                    (1993: 40–1)

In the above-mentioned task-based syllabus, pedagogical tasks
vary from target tasks, not only in level of complexity, but also in
motivational power: very often, pedagogical tasks are the more
motivating variants of the academic target tasks that learners may
perceive as boring. For instance, in secondary education, teachers
and syllabus designers often assume that promoting students' aca-
demic language learning proficiency is best done by tackling texts on
history, geography and other subjects in the course of Dutch. In terms
of relevance, this approach may be highly satisfying, however, these
texts often lack motivational power and, in addition, they tend to be
very complex: they abound in technical jargon, present the reader
with unknown worlds, abstract terminology, high information
density and metaphorical speech. This may have a negative impact
on pupils' expectations of success and perceived coping potential
(Dörnyei, 2002) and, as a result, may undermine their motivation to
try and understand the text.

A viable alternative may be pedagogical tasks involving texts that
deal with unusual, exciting or even spectacular topics, while at the
same time elaborating the pupils' knowledge of the world in such a
way that the knowledge domains included in the wider curriculum
are covered. For instance, a text about plants that possess exceptional
survival mechanisms or that have unusual growth patterns, texts
about the intelligence of dolphins or about the fall of Pompeï may be
more interesting to students, while at the same time still providing
them with a solid basis for developing knowledge of the subject as
well as academic reading skills. This would also give students a
scaffold that would motivate them to deal with 'real' academic texts
covering similar topics from a scientific and more abstract perspective.

To reach this goal, these texts, and the pedagogical tasks con-
structed around them, should have clear analogies with texts in the
other subjects of the curriculum. In terms of task processing
demands, what learners are asked to do with the texts in the Dutch
course should closely match the kinds of things learners are supposed
to do with target texts in the academic curriculum, such as:

1 Using them as a manual for performing physical or mental actions (e.g. instructions for experiments, instructions on how to make a certain product, procedures or algorithms for calculating or for decision-making, instructions for arithmetic tasks, etc.).
2 Consulting them as a source of information:
   - for finding the answer to a question or for solving a problem;
   - for processing and integrating knowledge;
   - for comparing the information in the text with already acquired knowledge, with particular opinions, set standards, etc.

From a formal point of view, the language in the pedagogical task should also closely resemble the language that is typical of subjects such as history and geography. Thus, the language should be de-contextualized, include syntactically complex sentences expressing a variety of relationships and include 'academic' vocabulary, coherence markers, etc. (Schleppegrell, 2001; Young & Nguyen, 2002).

These features, however, should not all be present in the texts from the beginning. As mentioned above, pedagogical tasks are manipulations of target tasks, not only in terms of motivating power, but also in terms of complexity (see also Chapter 3 in this volume). For instance, the level of decontextualizing can be controlled by the syllabus designer: texts at the beginning of a task-based syllabus or at the beginning of a new theme will preferably deal with concrete topics or offer extensive visual support. The density and syntactic complexity of the text as well as demands at the level of vocabulary can also be lowered. The pupils can then gradually build up their knowledge of the world, develop reading comprehension strategies and the academic language proficiency needed to handle more complex texts.
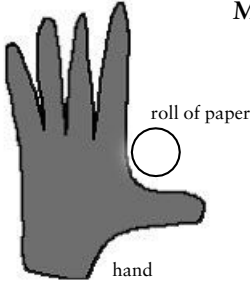
To illustrate this, Figure 2 shows an example of a text from a task-based syllabus for the first year of secondary education, aimed at improving academic language proficiency (Bogaert & Goossens, 1992, translated from Dutch by the authors of this chapter). The text in the example has to be used as a manual for performing a physical action.

Since the goal of task performance is situated at an action level, the above-mentioned tasks will probably be very motivating for pupils with a relatively low level of academic language proficiency. The tasks also provide strong contextual support, supporting the pupils in comprehension of the language input.

Similar examples of pedagogic tasks abound in the task-based syllabus for primary education that we mentioned earlier. When the target task, for example, requires children to understand and act out

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**Can you see through your hand?**

**Maybe this experiment will help you . . .**

roll of paper

hand

Take a thin magazine and roll it up into a cylinder with a diameter of about 2.5 centimetres. Raise your left hand about 10 centimetres from your face. At the same time, hold the roll of paper in your right hand, and put it between your index finger and the thumb of your left hand, as shown in the picture.

Next, briefly look through the roll with your right eye and look at your left hand with your left eye. Close both your eyes and then open them again. What do you see when you look at your left hand?

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**Figure 2**   A hole in your hand. A task taken from a task-based syllabus for Dutch language education at the level of secondary education. (From: *KLIMOP+TATAMI*, Centre for Language and Education, Leuven)

handbook instructions, the syllabus designer can 'disguise' the task and ask children to bake a cake. In order to do so, they need to follow the instructions of the recipe very carefully. Thus, without being consciously aware of the fact that they are performing an academic reading task, children can mix the ingredients and heat up the oven. The pupils get involved because, in the end, they really want to taste their own cake. One of the most typical reactions of teachers who started working with task-based syllabuses in Flanders was that their pupils were much more motivated to tackle these kinds of tasks than traditional language exercises (Devlieger *et al.*, 2003; Duran, 1994; Linsen, 1994; for more details on the implementation of task-based syllabuses, see Chapter 10 in this volume).

In another example taken from the same syllabus, the children have to read a description of a fictitious island in order to find out whether this would be an exciting place for children to go to. In terms of vocabulary and grammatical constructions, and even at the level of skill and processing demands (reading comprehension at the restructuring level), the text looks very much like an ordinary description in a geography book, but since it is embedded in an appealing story line and understanding the text is a means to answering an interesting question, children are eager to read the text in detail.

## 2.4  Tasks containing a gap

Although pedagogical tasks may be conceived of as the easier variants of target tasks, from a logical point of view, there should still be a gap between the students' current language proficiency and the language proficiency that is required for task performance. Tasks should address 'the zone of next potential' (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Williams & Burden, 1997) or the 'zone of proximal development' (Vygotsky, 1978).

   If the task presents no difficulties, opportunities for learning may be minimal. For students, there may be some intrinsic reward in doing things they are good at and have done successfully several times already, yet learning new skills and expanding a linguistic repertoire requires that the language learner is asked to do things with language that they have not as yet fully mastered. Locke and Kristof (1996) report on meta-analyses of over 400 studies which show unambiguously that goals that are perceived as difficult and challenging but are still attainable lead to higher performance than goals that are easy. In a teacher-centred, structure-based and explicit 'presentation, practice and production' approach, learning is expected to take place at the moment the teacher explicitly instructs the learners on a new aspect of the target language or of language use. Exercises are intended to give the learner the opportunity to practise the newly acquired knowledge. At the same time, exercises allow the teacher to verify whether what was instructed was actually acquired. In this view, exercises should not contain items that were not learnt before. Teaching tends to be equated with learning, and the heterogeneity of pupils, and their varied learning experiences are not taken into account. Learners are supposed to learn the same things at the same time and in the very same way.

   In task-based language education, by contrast, learners learn by confronting the gaps in their existing linguistic repertoire while performing tasks and being interactionally supported. How big the gap should be in task-based activities is difficult to determine, not least, because difficulty is to a great extent inherently learner related (Council of Europe, 2001; Robinson, 2001b; also see Chapter 3 in this volume). Yet, on the other hand, precision may not be as crucial an issue in task-based language education as is sometimes claimed in the literature (Ellis, 2003). In fact, for each individual pupil who is performing a task, the actual 'gap' will probably be different. This implies that each learner will run into different difficulties when dealing with the same task and, consequently, may learn different things. From the learner's point of view gaps are idiosyncratic: for

pupil A, a text aimed to encourage discussion on the extinction of dinosaurs will be difficult because she encounters various words she is unfamiliar with ('climate', 'cause'), while learner B will not be able to interpret the relation between digestion and starvation that is expressed only implicitly in the text. Still other pupils will have difficulties defending their own viewpoint or countering arguments against the theory they favour. The power of functional, meaningful tasks is that they offer the members of a heterogeneous group of learners (as is any class) a wide array of possibilities to each learn at their own level i.e. to learn whatever they are ready for at that particular moment.

This is illustrated by the fakir task (Figure 3) (Bogaert & Goossens, 1994), taken from a task-based syllabus for Dutch academic language learning in secondary education. In this task, the pupils first listen to a short story about a fakir who does spectacular things with ropes (part 1 in Figure 3). At the end of the story, the pupils are asked to determine whether the fakir is telling the truth or not. To find out the truth behind this story they can consult another text (part 2 in the figure) that describes in detail how the fakir goes about his clever trick.

Using language as a source of information, tasks like this one are of a more decontextualized nature than texts used as manuals (Figure 2). However, this does not necessarily imply that the former tasks only appear in later stages of the curriculum. As mentioned above, text and task complexity can be manipulated. To provide an answer to the question the text about the fakir raises, the pupils only need to comprehend the text on a global level, so they do not have to worry about or focus on the meaning of every single word or on words they have not acquired yet. It is crucial that teachers allow, and even stimulate pupils, to only aim at global reading comprehension in this case, for this comes naturally with the task (i.e. with the intended use of the text in view of the pursued goal). In turn, this will reduce the chance that pupils with a relatively low reading proficiency will perceive the task as extremely difficult, or even unfeasible and, hence, demotivating. On the other hand, pupils with a relatively higher level of language proficiency, can, in addition to global comprehension, be asked to answer questions that go into more details. In the latter case, the proportion of the information that the pupil has to process is considerably higher, so that he can ill afford not paying sufficient attention to certain details.

When tasks vary in the extent to which the information in texts has to be processed and pupils in some cases have to read on a global level while having to look for particular information in others, they

may also develop the strategic insight that the way you read a text depends on the intended use you want to make of it. This may help pupils to develop a wide array of goal-oriented reading strategies and provides an alternative, or a supplement, to the explicit instruction of strategies and direct modelling of complicated algorithms.

All this, once again, stresses the crucial importance of learners' motivation to try and tackle the tasks. In order for pupils to learn from bridging gaps in tasks, it is essential that they invest mental energy in doing something difficult. If they are not really motivated to bridge the gap and overcome the difficulties the task poses, they will not try to solve the comprehension and production problems they meet and hence, learn far less. On the other hand, pupils must also be able to bridge the gap. They can be very motivated to perform a challenging task, but if the gap is too large and they lack the tools to bridge it, learning effects may be minimal and self-confidence, as well as motivation, may decrease or collapse. Syllabus designers can take certain precautions to avoid gaps becoming too wide (see Chapter 3 in this volume), yet the bulk of the bridging work lies on the shoulders of the learner himself and his interlocutors. Through negotiating meaning, form and content, teachers and peers can provide a lot of crucial support when it comes to coping with task difficulties. We will elaborate on this point in the following paragraph (see also Chapters 8 and 9 in this volume on the role of the teacher in TBLT).

## 2.5  Tasks inherently elicit interaction and feedback

Syllabus designers should try to construct tasks in such a way that learners can, or even have to, engage in meaningful interaction with others in order to bring the task to a good end and, as a result, further develop their language proficiency.

### 2.5.1  Interaction serves different functions

While performing tasks, interaction with peers or with the teacher has the potential to fulfil many different functions for the individual language learner (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Ellis, 1999; Gass & Varonis, 1994; Lantolf, 2000; Long, 1983b, 1996; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Ortega, forthcoming; Pica, 1994; Swain, 1985, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978):

- The interlocutor can add to the learner's motivation to tackle the task and to persist when facing difficulties.

**A Gruesome Performance**

*The teacher introduces and reads the following story:*

Just before sunset, a fakir calls the passers-by to come and watch his performance. Seated in a circle with torches, the audience watches the fakir take a length of rope from a wicker basket and throw it into the air. He repeats this action a couple of times to demonstrate that it is an ordinary rope. But then, as he throws the rope into the air again, it suddenly coils up in the darkness, until the top is no longer visible and then miraculously stays there. The fakir's assistant, a slim young boy climbs the rope and is seen to vanish into thin air. He ignores his master's calls to come back down. Impatiently, the fakir draws a sharp knife, clenches it between his teeth, and clambers up after the boy – and also vanishes from sight. Then there is a series of blood-curdling yells, and various dismembered limbs of the young boy fall to the ground, followed by his head. The fakir then slides down the rope, which falls down behind him. He joins his other assistants, who are standing in tears around the remains of the young boy. They put the parts of the body into a basket. When the fakir claps his hands, the young boy emerges from the basket, smiling, miraculously reassembled and with no apparent damage.

*Task: How does this work? How do you think this 'miracle' can be explained?*

*Here are a number of possible explanations. Which one do you think is the correct one?*

- *The fakir has magic powers: he defies the laws of gravity and has the power to resuscitate the dead.*
- *The fakir is in fact an extraordinary hypnotist: through mass hypnosis he makes the audience believe that certain things happen which in reality do not happen at all.*
- *The fakir uses a trick.*

*After ticking the answer of your choice, ask your neighbour whether s/he has chosen the same answer or another one.*

*Who is right and who is wrong? Find out by reading the text opposite.*

**Text**

The trick – for a trick it is – is performed at twilight, before a background of nearby hills or trees. The fakir relies on a thin but strong black cord slung between two high points about fifteen meters above ground level. The rope, which has a small but heavy black ball at the end and which is strong enough to support the weight of the slim boy, is thrown up over the cord. The boy climbs up the rope. The public is blinded by the light of the torches and cannot see the boy high up on the rope in the dark sky. Once the boy reaches the top, he attaches the rope to the horizontal black cord, which can then take the weight of the magician.

And the boy's dismembered body parts? When the fakir climbs up, hidden under his wide robe there are shaven monkey limbs, dressed in clothes similar to the boy's, and with a bit of red sauce splattered around. The boy's head is a wooden model fitted with a turban. When the fakir reaches the top, the boy climbs into his robe and throws down the limbs. When the fakir descends and goes to the basket, the boy disappears into it. The limbs then go into the basket, the lid is put on, the fakir claps his hands, and – presto! – the boy pops out.

**Figure 3**   A gruesome performance. A task taken from a task-based syllabus for Dutch language teaching at the level of secondary school. (From: *KLIMOP+TATAMI*, Centre for Language and Education, Leuven)

- The interlocutor can function as a sounding board for the learner, stimulating the latter to verbalize explicitly his ideas, opinions and hypotheses, and in this way manipulate concepts, definitions, meanings and forms.
- The interlocutor can provide feedback to what the learner says, questioning and challenging the latter's contributions, and in this way push the learner's output, both at a linguistic level and a cognitive level. This may, in turn, push the student to process input more accurately or profoundly.
- The interlocutor may engage in a collaborative dialogue with the learner which, if seen as a joint effort to construct discourse, promotes acquisition in a number of ways e.g. through scaffolding.
- The interlocutor may provide answers to questions the learner cannot solve himself. For instance, the interlocutor may explain the meaning of a word, suggest a phrase the learner could not come up with himself, explain a certain grammatical rule, correct errors, etc.

In this interpretation of TBLT, interaction serves as a powerful means for the learner to come to grips with particular aspects of language use that the task entails (e.g. the meaning of a word, how to say a particular thing) and, at the same time, creates a context for authentic language use in its own right.

### 2.5.2  Stimulating peer interaction

Syllabus designers can opt for grouping formats (e.g. information gap tasks) that prompt learners to cooperate, by making them mutually dependent on each other's work, each other's opinions or uniquely held information to solve a joint problem. Many tasks in the above-mentioned Flemish syllabuses are jigsaw or information gap tasks (Pica *et al.*, 1993). Every member of the group receives a different text, which presents a different hypothesis or different bits of information on the central topic. Every member has the responsibility of reading his own text and imparting his information to the other members of the group. Only in this way can the group perform the task successfully. Learners facing comprehension problems may in this way be prompted to ask for clarification or confirmation. Pupils who do not succeed in imparting their information in a clear and coherent way may be challenged, pushed and aided by other members of the group.

In a quasi-experimental study on the role of interaction in

language learning, Van den Branden (1995, 1997, 2000a) asked 10-year-old children in Flemish schools to perform one reading comprehension task and one speaking task. The tasks complied with the task features listed above: the pupils were asked to perform a motivating task that was relevant in terms of the official attainment goals and the linguistic forms included, but it was manipulated in order to increase motivational power. In the reading comprehension task (Van den Branden, 2000a), the pupils were asked to read a Dutch detective story consisting of a number of chapters. After each chapter, a comprehension test was administered. The pupils read the chapters in various conditions:

a individual reading of a baseline version;
b individual reading of a premodified version;
c reading of the baseline version and negotiating about the meaning of difficult words and phrases with a peer;
d reading of the baseline version and negotiation with the teacher.

We will only focus on the effects of the peer condition here (for the effects of the teacher condition, see Chapter 8 in this volume). Peer negotiation yielded significantly better individual comprehension scores than individual reading of the baseline version or the pre-modified version. Rather unexpectedly, pairs that were hetero-geneous in terms of level of Dutch language proficiency (like for instance pairs of NS and NNS speakers of Dutch) yielded more intensive interaction and more gains in terms of comprehension than homogeneous pairs. To explain these results, Van den Branden (2000a: 436) suggests that pupils with a relatively low level of language proficiency may learn from their more proficient peers because of the explanations of difficult words in the input the latter provides. This mechanism may also partly explain the added value for the more proficient partner:

> the efforts highly proficient pupils have to make to explain input that is (way) above the proficiency level of their inter-locutors brings them profit as well. Trying to explain a difficult word or sentence to another may be a way of narrowing down its meaning for oneself.

Van den Branden further suggests that, in the heterogeneous dyads, the member with the superior language skills felt extra motivation to comprehend the input because there was a less proficient partner who counted on him.

A similar mechanism was probably at work in the speaking task of

this study (Van den Branden, 1997). This part of the study involved an information gap task, obliging the pupils to exchange information in order to solve a murder case. A pre-test–post-test design was set up, aiming to study whether the interaction that the pairs jointly constructed had any effects on the pupils' subsequent individual performance of the same speaking task. This proved to be the case. The pupils were found to negotiate meaning and message content while exchanging information, and this, in turn, had significant positive effects on subsequent individual output. Again, heterogeneous groups proved to be particularly eager to engage in negotiation routines. The less proficient speakers were alerted by their more proficient peers to the parts of their descriptions that were incomprehensible or unclear, and were also offered solutions to these language problems. For the less proficient peer, this feedback turned out to be very salient input, some of which was incorporated in the language produced during a subsequent individual performance of the same task. In turn, the more proficient peers were pushed by their less proficient peer to fine tune their output to the latter's level of comprehension. In this respect, the fact that the pupils were so highly dependent on each other in order to obtain crucial information may have been a decisive factor in terms of eliciting negotiation.

### 2.5.3  Promoting task-based interaction

Interaction among peers, however, does not always run smoothly (Cohen, 1986; Cohen & Lotan, 1997; Foster, 1998; Foster & Ohta, 2005). Problems that often arise in group interaction have to do with domination (one pupil dominates the task performance, reducing the other members' chances of contributing), non-involvement and, consequently, non-participation, the 'free rider effect' (one pupil does all the hard work while the others profit), the diffusion of responsibility (some pupils are simply ignored, their ideas are not taken into consideration, while pupils with a higher status do not bother to explain what is happening) and the absence of interactional processes, such as the negotiation for meaning, that are believed to foster language acquisition. Van den Branden & Van Gorp (2000: 48) studied the interaction in peer groups of 11-year-old children, as they were tackling tasks taken from Flemish task-based syllabuses for science education, based on Cohen's Cooperative Learning method of Complex Instruction (Cohen & Lotan, 1997; Paelman, 2001). The researchers concluded that the quantity and quality of interaction that the group work generated was heavily dependent on the type of task that the pupils were confronted with:

Closed tasks that confronted the pupils with predigested input and asked for low-level processing (such as placing ready-made statements about the environment into certain categories) barely gave rise to serious discussion, nor to a confrontation between the pupils' own ideas and those in the input. At the other end of the continuum, tasks for which the goal was only vaguely described and which allowed for an almost excessive openness (such as writing the lyrics for a rap song), allowed the pupils to stray from the central topic and to 'take it easy' on the content level.

A workable, and fruitful compromise between these two extremes seemed to be a task with a clearly defined goal (i.e. a well-defined problem), but which allowed the pupils a great deal of intellectual and creative freedom to design their own route towards the solution of the problem.

<div align="right">(Van den Branden & Van Gorp, 2000: 48)</div>

However, besides task features, there were other variables influencing the quantity and quality of peer interaction in this study. For instance, qualitative analyses revealed that the social relations between the group members had a strong effect on the interaction in the groups. The roles that the children took up, their relative status in the group, their personalities, the extent to which they were willing to cooperate and support each other and their interpretation of the task were so influential that the same task performed in two different groups resulted in two vastly different stretches of interaction, both from a quantitative and a qualitative point of view. Tasks are no easy recipes: the actual activity that they give rise to, and the learning that might arise as a result, remain highly unpredictable. In the end, it is the actual interactional work that matters and that results in learning.

In this respect, Van den Branden & Van Gorp (2000) suggest that when tasks do not result in the kind of rich interaction that they are supposed to elicit, the teacher might try to intervene and set things right, either by bringing the group members back to the task, by supporting them as they try to handle the tasks or by joining them in looking for answers to questions that are hard to find. In order to realize the full potential of task-based activities, the teacher must take over from the syllabus, which, because it is typically designed for a heterogeneous group of learners, can never be fine-tuned to the needs of all individual language learners (for more details on the role of the teacher in TBLT, see Chapters 8 and 9 in this volume).

## 3  Tasks integrated in language lessons

Having covered the main aspects of how tasks can enhance (academic) language learning, we will now discuss how educational activities were built up around tasks in the syllabuses we developed in order to function as optimal 'activity settings' (Rueda & Dembo, 1995). Though many different scenarios are possible, the syllabuses described in the previous paragraph stuck to a fairly tight lesson design. In the majority of cases, a task and a lesson (of about 50 minutes) coincided. We are aware of the fact that thinking of tasks as lessons in this way is simplistic. Some tasks undoubtedly need extended stretches of activity that go beyond the boundaries of a strict time schedule. Some tasks ask for outdoor activity and for the integration of different subjects in the curriculum (for more details on how tasks work across the curriculum, see Chapter 5 in this volume). One of the main reasons why the task designers stuck to a rather conservative conceptualization of tasks and lessons was the pressure exerted by the teachers involved in the above-mentioned implementation studies and try-out sessions. Treating tasks as lessons, then, was one of the compromises that the task designers made in order to promote the actual use of the syllabuses in the classroom (for more details on the reactions of teachers to task-based syllabuses, see Chapter 10 in this volume).

The lessons consist of three phases: an introduction (pre-task phase), a during-task phase of task performance and a post-task phase (cf. Skehan, 1996, 1998; Willis, 1996). By including a detailed description of the introduction, the during-task phase and the post-task phase in the syllabus guidelines, the syllabus designers aimed to offer maximum support to the teacher in using the tasks as a tool for creating powerful environments for language learning.

To illustrate the three phases of a task-based lesson, we will use another example of a task ('All for a coin'), which we have often used during in-service training for teachers of secondary education.

### 3.1  Introducing the task

The way in which a new task is introduced is quite essential in TBLT. Introductions to tasks usually integrate three functions:

a  motivating the learners to perform the task;
b  preparing the learners to perform the task by discussing presupposed or useful knowledge of the world;

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**All for a coin**

Task: *The story below is about a boy who is in big trouble because his father thinks he is dumb and lazy. A smart girl comes to his aid. What do you think of the solution she proposes?*

Once upon a time there lived a rich merchant in Kashmir. This merchant had a son who was terribly stupid and lazy. Whatever instruction he was given by his father or mother, the son always did the exact opposite. If he did anything at all . . .

Eventually, the merchant got so upset that he wanted to chase his son out of the house. The boy's mother could not convince her husband into giving the son a last chance. The merchant called the boy and said: 'My son, I want you to go to the market and buy something that we can eat, something we can feed to the cow, and something we can plant in the garden. You are not allowed to spend more than this single coin. If you can manage to do this, then you can return home. If not, then stay away.'

While the boy was walking to the market square, he started crying. He had no idea how he could buy all these things with the single coin his father had given him. He would never be allowed to come home again. He was crying so hard that a girl, who was working in the fields, heard him and asked him what was the matter. When he told her about his father's assignment, she shook her head and told him not to worry. She told him that there was an easy way to perform this task.

That night the boy came home with a big smile on his face. He said: 'Father, I have brought something that meets all your demands,' and he put his treasure on the table. It was a watermelon.

Question: *Do you think the merchant will be satisfied with the watermelon or should the boy leave the house? Does your partner have the same opinion?*

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**Figure 4**   All for a coin. A task taken from a task-based syllabus for Dutch language teaching at the level of secondary education. (From: *KLIMOP+TATAMI*, Centre for Language and Education, Leuven)

c  organizing the performance phase by providing clear instructions on what the purpose of the task is, and how it should or can be performed.

Figure 5  illustrates how all this is stimulated in the introduction to the above-mentioned task.

To persuade pupils to 'cross the Rubicon' (Heckhausen, 1991) and step into the world of the task in order to learn from it, the pupils'

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**Pre-task conversation**

'Once there was a boy who was in deep trouble: his father found him too lazy and stupid to be his son. Fortunately, a smart girl helped the boy, so he could escape his father's punishment. If you want to know what punishment the father had in mind for the boy, and what happened afterwards, you have to read the story for yourself. But mind: when you have finished reading, you have to tell me whether you approve of the girl's solution or not. I am very curious about your answers . . .'

Refer to the picture representing the region in which the story is situated and tell the pupils that the region is called Kashmir. Ask the pupils if anyone knows in which part of the world Kashmir is and if necessary, ask the pupils to look it up in their atlas (using the index).

Give the students instructions to read the story individually.

Then ask them:

- 'What did the boy eventually buy with his coin?' . . . 'Yes, indeed, he bought a watermelon.' Check whether all pupils know what a watermelon is.
- What do you think: will the merchant send his son away, or will he be satisfied with the watermelon? Why do you think so? First consider your answer well, and then write it down on a piece of paper. When you and your neighbour have finished, you can compare your answers.'

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**Figure 5**    Introduction (pre-task phase) of the task 'All for a coin' (in Figure 4) (taken from the teacher manual of *KLIMOP+TATAMI*, Centre for Language and Education, Leuven)

interest has to be aroused. In this task, this happens by giving away a small part of the story that may catch their attention (see Figure 5). The story is about a stupid boy and a smart girl, while in folk stories it is usually the other way around. Teachers may include other details to hold attention and can add to the pupils' motivation by being enthusiastic about the story themselves. Since this is a reasonably simple story, not much knowledge of the world has to be established or elicited during the introduction. However, for tasks that deal with more culturally biased topics or topics with which many pupils are unfamiliar, an introductory conversation is preferably held during which the learners can activate or create relevant knowledge of the world that may be useful or, in some cases, indispensable for task performance.

There is always a danger of overload in this phase of the lesson. After all, the introduction should not take more time than the task

performance itself. Discussion of relevant knowledge of the world should ideally be limited to elements that can be of real service to the learner. The preparatory discussion should not take the place of the pupils' own meaning construction that builds on the use they make of the information in the text, the visual aids provided and their existing knowledge of the world. Neither should the teacher, at this stage, feel obliged to explain all difficult words in the text. For many words that may be difficult and that influence the degree to which the reader is able to access the story, the linguistic context may provide ample clues for the pupil to infer their meaning, or at least construct hypotheses about their meaning, themselves. And, of course, there is nothing that keeps the teacher from taking appropriate supportive actions *while* the pupils are dealing with the task (during-task phase) or afterwards (post-task phase). Problems may be tackled best when they actually occur i.e. when pupils get stuck while trying to perform the task. At that moment, the pupils may experience the information or explanation given or found as most relevant. The teacher should also refrain from giving away too much of the story beforehand or revealing how it ends. This might dampen the pupils' curiosity.

Towards the end of the introduction in the example above, the pupils are instructed to start reading the story individually. When they have finished reading, the teacher once again checks whether everybody has understood the instructions and knows what is expected of him or her. At this point, each pupil should know what the word 'watermelon' means: the teacher may want to control this explicitly, for the task cannot be performed if the pupils do not know this. Finally, the teacher restates the purpose of the activity in very explicit and unambiguous terms, indicating the conditions of performance and making instructions very specific (Locke & Kristof, 1996).

## 3.2  Supporting task performance

In the example above, having the pupils compare their solutions was included deliberately by the syllabus designers: this phase is specifically designed to generate authentic interaction, discussion and negotiation between language learners. The cognitive and interactional activity that the students develop at this stage is crucial in terms of intended learning outcomes. After all, task-based language learning is highly dependent on the basic premises of social-constructivism, stating that learners acquire complex skills by actively tackling holistic tasks, calling for an integrated use of the target skills, and by collaborating with peers and more knowledgeable

partners while doing so (De Corte, 1998; Rueda & Dembo, 1995; Steffe & Gale, 1995).

The most typical 'more knowledgeable partner' in the average classroom is the teacher. In line with the basic philosophy underlying TBLT, the teacher's interventions during the task-performance phase, however, should not result in a limitation or obstruction of learner activity and initiative. As will be elaborately described in Chapters 8 and 9 of this book, the teacher's role is not, in the first place, to solve the pupils' problems, but rather should take the form of interactional support in which the teacher mediates between task demands and the learner's current abilities. The role of the teacher, above all, consists in guiding the learner's problem-solving process. This process, and hence the teacher's supportive interventions, will be different for different learners. The essence of the mediation is that learners are supported to tackle the specific problems they face, whether these are related to cognitive operations or affective issues, whether they be problems having to do with the meaning or with the forms of language.

### 3.2.1  Combining focus on meaning with focus on form

There is considerable debate on whether focus on form should be provided to learners engaged in the authentic communication that tasks are supposed to generate, and to what extent this might interfere with the task's intended focus on meaning. Or, put in terms of the three phases of a task-based lesson, 'should focus on form be provided in the pre-task, the during-task or the post-task phase?' Recent research (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Ellis, 2003; Long *et al.*, 1998; Mackey & Philp, 1998; Norris & Ortega, 2000; Samuda, 2001; Skehan, 2002; Van Patten, 1996) offers no conclusive results and seems to support different options. It does seem to indicate, however, that the exact moment when focus on form is provided (i.e. before, during or after meaningful task performance) is not as decisive as its close proximity to the functional use of the targeted forms.

Goossens' recent study (2003) on the impact of explicit and implicit teaching on young children's second language acquisition corroborates the above hypothesis. In this study, six classes of 11–12-year-old children, spread over six different Flemish Educational Priority Policy Schools, were taught the basics of a semi-artificial language through the use of explicit, implicit and combined (explicit-implicit) language teaching methods. The results of this study highlight the potential of pedagogical approaches that combine

meaningful language use with a contextualized and task-embedded focus on form. The teaching condition in which new language items received explicit focus within a communicative context yielded the best acquisition scores. The fact that in this condition the new language had to be used by the children as a functional means to learn all kinds of exciting things about a strange island added to the enthusiasm with which they confronted the meaningful tasks they were asked to perform. Yet, the focus on form ensured that their attention was also drawn to the explicit meaning of specific lexical items and to a number of syntactic features of the semi-artificial language. In the meaning-only condition with only implicit introduction of new language items within a communicative context, the children got completely absorbed in the discovery of the strange island. Confronted with elaborate language input within a content-based context, they addressed the new linguistic code in an economical way, only processing and discussing the language they absolutely needed to perform the discovery tasks.

Goossens' study did not yield any firm conclusions on *when* focus on form should ideally be inserted. Whether this occurred before, after or during the task phase did not yield significant differences. Far more essential seems to have been the close proximity of focus on form to meaningful language use. This, then, leaves many options open for task-based syllabus developers and teachers constructing language lessons around tasks. Clearly, focus on form may be elegantly integrated in the during-task phase, for instance when students face comprehension or language production problems. If, for instance, students have to process the information in a particular text, but fail to do so because they do not know the meaning of certain essential words, explicit focus on the meaning of these words may be of immediate use. Likewise, short focus on form during the pre-task phase may contribute to the learner's noticing the linguistic forms while performing the task, while post-task focus on form may add to restructuring, automatizing and consciously attending to language forms that were used in the previous phase.

## 3.3  The post-task phase

Tasks may ask for a specific outcome, yet teachers (and learners) working with task-based syllabuses should be aware of the fact that the absolute correctness and uniformity of the product is less important in many task-based activities than the mental and inter-actional energy invested in the process of task performance. Tasks differ from exercises in the sense that learners do not have to prove

that they perfectly know how to apply a specific procedure or can (re)produce particular facts of knowledge. Tasks are designed, first and foremost, to create an environment in which learners are allowed to experiment with language, use language functionally and to make mistakes while doing so. Finding the correct solution may be a bonus, but learners do not necessarily have to find it in order to learn language. Through constructing joint dialogues, through negotiating meaning, through discussing different options, they may pick up new linguistic forms from each other, experiment with or come up with new procedures or strategies to solve a linguistic problem or extend their knowledge of the world.

This fundamental principle guides the design of the post-task phase. In the syllabuses we developed, the post-task discussion aims at a verbal and interactive reconstruction of the process of task performance. This is illustrated in Figure 6, which describes the post-task phase in the lesson described in Figures 4 and 5.

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**Post-task discussion**

If the pupils do not succeed in answering the question, then discuss the features of watermelons, using the following questions:

- 'What is the first thing that springs to mind when I ask you what people do with a watermelon?'
- 'Does a watermelon only still your hunger?'
- 'Can you eat the whole watermelon? Which parts can't you eat? What do people do with the peels of vegetables and fruit? What can you do with the pits?'

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**Figure 6**    Post-task discussion of the task in Figure 4 (taken from the teacher manual of *KLIMOP+TATAMI*, Centre for Language and Education, Leuven)

Teachers and students verbally reflect on the way in which the various groups or individuals tackled the task, including the routes that did not lead to a 'correct' solution (if the task was supposed to have one). In this way, the post-task discussion may have much to offer in terms of strategic communicative competence and general learning strategies, for it may offer the students valuable insights into how tasks can be tackled, what may be the possible effects of certain procedures or strategies, and what may be learnt in terms of efficiently and effectively performing similar tasks in the future.

Post-task phases also offer many opportunities for focus on form. Though teachers should not aim to convert the post-task phase to full-blown vocabulary drills, nor to a detailed text analysis, post-task

discussions lend themselves very nicely to the explicit discussion of linguistic forms. The syllabuses we developed advise the teachers to focus primarily on those linguistic elements or rules that are, or were, relevant to the students, whether they are words the pupils found hard to understand or errors they made in the during-task phase or expressions they failed to produce. Focus on form should, in other words, be attuned to the learners' internal syllabus (Littlewood, 1984; Long & Norris, 2000), rather than to the teachers' external syllabus.

## 4  Conclusions

Task-based syllabuses take the learning needs of the target group as the starting point. In order to promote learners' proficiency to perform the kind of language tasks they will face in life in general and in school, tasks are designed as pedagogical variants of the target tasks: they invite the learner to do the very same things with language and to get immersed in the same interactional and cognitive processes as when performing the target tasks. Pedagogical tasks will often be more motivating and simpler than the ultimate target task, yet they always require meaningful language use and require language learners to 'stretch their muscles'.

In order for learners to bridge the gap and learn from the tasks, meaningful interaction between learners, and between the teacher and the learners, is an essential ingredient of task-based activities. This is where the interlocutors largely take over from the syllabus. Nevertheless, this chapter has shown that syllabus developers can manipulate task design in such a way as to enhance the chance that interaction will occur and that interaction will be focused on certain aspects of content or particular linguistic items. By making certain items task-essential (Loschky & Bley-Vroman, 1993), chances are that the learners will pay attention to them. Furthermore, syllabus developers may provide ample suggestions to teachers as to how the interaction with the learners can be conducted. In many of the syllabuses we developed, we included suggested versions of introductory talks and post-task discussions. These were not intended to be prescriptive, but merely illustrative of the kind of rich interaction that the tasks in the syllabus will hopefully give rise to.

# 5 Task-based language teaching in science education and vocational training

Nora Bogaert, Koen Van Gorp, Katrien Bultynck,
An Lanssens and Veerle Depauw

There is a considerable body of empirical evidence showing that the complexity of the language used by science teachers in primary and secondary education and by vocational instructors in adult education is ill-adapted to their students' level of language proficiency (Bogaert, 2001; Geudens & Rymenans, 1992; Gunstone & Watts, 1998; Hodson, 1998; Lemke, 1990; Valdés, 2004). It is claimed that particularly for learners who have a poor command of academic or technical language or for non-native speakers of the medium of instruction, teachers' language has been an 'obstacle' to learning, rather than an efficient medium of instruction. As a result, the learners involved fail to acquire target skills and target subject knowledge. Ultimately, this linguistic problem contributes to the fact that for these learners education fails to foster their personal development and emancipation, to raise their chances of success in higher and adult education and to feed their aspirations for better jobs (Mawer, 1999).

In this chapter, we will describe promising pedagogical approaches that have been associated with terms such as 'Content-based instruction' (Mohan, 1986; Snow & Brinton, 1997; Stoller, 2004) and 'Language across the curriculum' (Corson, 1987) and that have been introduced in an attempt to cope with this 'linguistic' problem of subject teaching. In this chapter we are particularly interested in the potential of task-based teaching to overcome some of the problems posed. In order to be able to assess the potential of these approaches, we will first have to examine the 'linguistic challenge' of science teaching and technical training a little more closely.

## 1 Expert language

The language that is used by science teachers, technical instructors and vocational trainers, and that is present in the handbooks and manuals they use, has been described as exceedingly 'theoretical',

'difficult', 'complex', 'disembedded' and 'decontextualized' (Bogaert, 2001; Cummins, 1986; Donaldson, 1978; Hajer & Meestringa, 1995; Mohan, 1986; Snow *et al*., 1991; Van den Branden & Linsen, 2001). This is because subject teaching is supposed to initiate students into disciplines such as maths, geography, history or technology which can have highly abstract aspects to them, or into very technical disciplines such as car mechanics and welding.

Both in science teaching and vocational training, the concrete world regularly has to make way for abstract descriptions of the systems and principles that govern the workings of objects and describe the rules or patterns behind discernible phenomena. Science tries to look behind the world, in an attempt to discover general principles and describe the relations between them. To explain why, for instance, some levers are more efficient than others, we need to understand how 'power', 'weight' and 'fulcrum' are related to each other, and apply formulas like: 'the power multiplied by the distance to the fulcrum equals the weight multiplied by the distance to the fulcrum'. Such descriptions allow the scientist to reduce an enormous amount of tactile experiences to a restricted number of explanatory concepts and principles.

In order to describe the intricate mechanisms behind the world of action, experts make use of abstract, complex and specialized language (Lemke, 1990; Hodson, 1998). The precise, unambiguous language that is needed to express impersonal, universal explanations, logical accounts and exact descriptions tends to be characterized by expert terminology (jargon), lack of reference to the here-and-now and complex syntactic constructions, as illustrated by the sentences below:

- As a result of the gradual transition from head to trunk and the absence of shoulders, the rabbit's body is streamlined.
- Factors that have contributed to the development of the area are, among others, the presence of raw materials and the growing sales potential.
- To enhance the flowing of solder, and to protect the metals from oxidation, fluids need to be used in the process of soldering.
- The crank axle supports the pedals and allows revolving.
- The number of charges and so the quantity of electrical energy that is transported each second from the battery to the consumers and that is carried through the wiring is called the current intensity. The current intensity is indicative of the quantity of energy that is converted into labour per second.

Even at the level of primary education, scientific language seems to

be unavoidable. A Dutch Year 5 schoolbook on science teaching for 10-year-old pupils includes the following text:

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**Weight arm and power arm**

On the seesaw you should choose a friend who has the same weight as you. You can investigate why this is so by moving the fulcrum between the power and the weight.

The distance from the weight to the fulcrum is called the **weight arm**. The distance from the power to the fulcrum is called the **power arm**.

The distances of the power and the weight to the fulcrum have a great impact on the power that has to be exerted.

The power that is necessary to move an object or lift it, decreases as the power arm becomes longer. The shorter the power arm, the more power is needed.

We also determine that more power is required when the weight arm becomes longer. When the weight arm becomes shorter, less power is needed.

*Conclusion:*
A lever with a short weight arm and a long power arm require minimal power to lift or move a weight.

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**Figure 1**    Example of academic language in a Dutch-medium science syllabus for primary education. (From: *Natuurvriend* 1, 1990; translated by the authors)

The vocabulary of expert language does not only include jargon, but also a large number of words and expressions that are not specific for a particular discipline, but that are widely used across disciplines (Nation, 2001). Among others, Flemish applied linguists (Bogaert, 1998; Jaspaert, 1996a,b) have called this 'general academic language': it includes words like 'summarize', 'explain', 'cause', 'effect' and 'perception'. In the conversation below (based on Kortas, 1996), two students (A and S – both 12 years old) and a researcher (R) discuss the use of these terms in the classroom:

R: Anna, the teacher was talking about a 'series of observations, big and small observations'. Do you know what these are?
A: No.
R: Don't you know the word 'observation'?
A: It sounds familiar.
R: But you can't tell its meaning?
A: No.
R: And you, Sam?

S: I can't remember, I think it has something, something to do with volume, I can't remember.
R: You don't know the word 'observation'?
S: Yes, I do, but not in maths.
R: What does it usually mean?
S: Well, I am not sure about that either ... but ... something that had happened.
R: The teacher also used the word 'increase' in his instructions. Do you remember what that was about?
A: No.
R: Do you know what the word 'increase' means?
A: No.
R: He was talking about the boxes with paperclips, and in some there were less paperclips, and in other boxes there were more ... and increase had something to do with that. Can you explain it to me?
A: No ...

One variable that complicates matters in subject teaching and vocational training is the messenger i.e. the teacher or the syllabus developer. Quite typically, these are experts themselves, who have become highly familiar with the abstract and specialist perspective with which they approach 'their' field (Young & Nguyen, 2002). Furthermore, many of them have grown up in middle-class society and have been successful in education. They are insiders, who often find it hard to tune into the lack of knowledge and the different perspectives that some learners (the 'laymen') exhibit (Lee & Fradd, 1996). As a result, teachers seem to use language which is meaningful to teachers, but not to students (Gunstone & Watts, 1998). As the examples below illustrate, this may lead to confusion, for instance when specialized concepts are not explained (point 1 in list below), when relationships are left implicit (2), when certain steps in a train of thought are skipped (3), when there is high information density (4), when references are unclear (5), or when metaphorical language abounds (6). The examples are taken from a variety of Dutch handbooks and syllabuses for secondary education; the translations are ours.

1 Dodecaphonia is a method of composition that results from a number of attainments of atonal music in which chromaticism replaced diatonic music and tonality was no longer determined by the tension between dominant and tonic.
2 The bourgeoisie fondly embraced the ideas of the Enlightenment. The absolute monarchy and the privileges of nobility and clergy weighed heavily on the middle class.
3 Heating makes most materials expand. Gasses expand more than liquids, and liquids in turn more than solids. Cold gasoline

expands in the fuel tank. This is why the tank spills over. Cooling makes most materials shrink.
4  Carefully draw (in the picture) a quadrangle with diagonals that are unequal, but that are perpendicular to each other and of which exactly one diagonal is bisected.
5  A clear example of the practical genius of the Romans were their roads, also called military highways. Initially, their aim was purely administrative and military. They gradually extended the road network, and soon they also served commerce and the common people.
6  The Achaeans were no choir boys. They loved a good fight.

None of the above-mentioned features of academic language needs to be detrimental to the students' learning process as such. Much depends on the way language is used in the classroom or on the training floor. As interaction studies in the 1980s and 1990s vividly illustrated (Cazden, 1988; Geudens & Rymenans, 1992; Heath, 1983; Mehan, 1979; Musumeci, 1996; Van der Aalsvoort & Van der Leeuw, 1992), the bulk of science and vocational teaching in many parts of the world is of the 'transmission' type (Barnes *et al.*, 1986). The teacher monopolizes the floor. Learners are treated as 'empty containers' that need to be filled by the expert. It is up to the latter to decide at what moment in time the learners are ready for which particular bit of information. The expert also decides on the particular route the learners are to follow and predominantly opts for the explicit mode, in which the expert provides explicit instruction on the topic at hand. The learner is supposed to reproduce the explicit explanations afterwards, in order to prove he has 'absorbed' the knowledge that was transmitted.

In the transmission model, the learner is confronted with the top of a conceptual iceberg: extremely long processes of exploration by mankind, gradually leading to ever increasing levels of abstraction and specialization, and that are now claimed to have reached their culmination are verbalized to the layman. The link with the physical reality to which the explanations refer is reduced to the level of mere illustration. Learners with a limited scope of knowledge of the world may find it hard to relate the knowledge transmitted by the teacher to concrete phenomena. Furthermore, the relevance of all this expertise for the learners is often left implicit. As the excerpt below illustrates, the learner may wonder what the knowledge can be used for and what problems it may help to solve (R = researcher/S = Sam):

R:  Sam, this was just revision, right? Do you know why the teacher repeats the subject matter?

S:  Yes, he wanted to see what we did not understand, and what we did understand.

R:  Is it important subject matter?

S:  I don't know.

R:  Do you know what you should remember?

S:  Yes, what is a median and so on, and what is a mode. And what is a mean. All kinds of stuff.

R:  And why do you need the median, the mean and the mode?

S:  For the tests.

R:  For the tests! Can you think of a situation in reality in which for instance the median and the mode play a role?

S:  Uhm . . . No. . . .

R:  And can you tell me what a median is?

S:  Uhm . . . no . . . I can't remember.

                    (Based on Kortas, 1996; adapted and translated by us)

As a result, the learners' motivation to try and understand the experts' instructions and to acquire knowledge in general may be seriously threatened (Rueda & Dembo, 1995; Dörnyei & Ottó, 1998). This may be aggravated when teachers or trainers are under time pressure to 'complete' the curriculum. In their eyes, time may simply be lacking to explain things thoroughly, to relate abstract principles to everyday experience, to establish links with the learners' personal life, to support the learners while trying to find applications for the knowledge they are transmitting and to provide extra care for the learners who have a hard time understanding the instructions. Some learners are doomed to be trapped in a vicious circle of failure, since most of the syllabuses follow the cumulative principle: every new lesson builds upon the knowledge that was relayed in the previous lessons.

Some learners are able to compensate for this lack of 'deep' learning by resorting to mimicry. As Rymenans & Geudens (1994), who conducted classroom observations in science classes in Flemish secondary schools, put it: 'the best parrot gets an A'. The closer the pupils' verbosity resembles the teachers', the better the former tend to be evaluated:

Teacher:  Claudia, can you tell me what enzymes are? We talked about that a few weeks ago.

Claudia:  Enzymes are uhm . . . processes uh . . ., the chemical proce-. . . uh . . . processes accelerate without being consumed.

                    (Based on Hajer & Meestringa, 1995; our translation)

Linguistically, cognitively and motivationally, this kind of education places high demands on learners. For certain groups of learners, these demands may simply be too high (Bernier, 1997;

Thomas & Collier, 2002; Valdés, 2004): learners with a relatively low level of language proficiency in the medium of instruction, learners who are not acquainted with these kinds of explanations and instructions in their home environment, learners with a limited knowledge of the world, adult learners who already failed in compulsory education because they had difficulties coping with the transmission model. In order to make sure that these learners can fully profit from education and training, we need to reconsider how this model can be adapted or refined, in order to prevent educational failure.

## 2  Raising teachers' linguistic awareness and promoting students' language proficiency

Those looking for solutions to the above-mentioned problem have to be aware that in education around the world, language courses and subjects such as geography, history or technology are largely treated as separate entities in the curriculum. They are taught in different courses and often by different teachers. In secondary education, subjects like history and technology are taught by experts, while 'language' is taught by linguists. Likewise, in the vocational strands of secondary education and in adult education, the training of vocational skills is assigned to technical instructors, while 'language' is taught by language teachers. For instance, in Flanders, where Dutch is the official language, the Flemish Service for Employment and Vocational Training (VDAB) organizes vocational training for unemployed, adult non-native speakers of Dutch. This training programme consists of two strands: technical training on the one hand, and the teaching of Dutch as a second language on the other. The latter is organized, both in preparation of, and alongside the technical training. There are high barriers between the technical and the linguistic strands. These have developed historically and have become very institutionalized. Communication between teachers in the different strands is very limited in many schools and training centres. As a result, what is taught in the language courses is ill-adapted to what happens in the subject courses or technical training sessions, and vice versa. This, in turn, leads to disparity among teachers as to the level of language proficiency they should expect from their students.

### 2.1  A dual-track solution

When efforts are made to bridge the gap between the learners' (second) language proficiency and the linguistic demands posed by

the educational programme, whether this be vocational or academic, various ways to approach this problem can be considered:

a  *Raising the learners' academic or technical language proficiency.* Schools and training centres could try and increase the learners' language proficiency to such an extent that they are better able to meet the linguistic demands made of them during technical or academic programmes. In this vein, a language course would have the explicit goal of preparing learners for the language of the technical or scientific course.

b  *Raising the teachers' linguistic awareness*. Another strategy is to try and make technical trainers and science teachers become more aware of their own language use and to train them to make their language more accessible to their learners.

The two approaches can be combined. For instance, in Flemish secondary education, state-subsidized initiatives were taken to try and bridge the gap between pupils' limited academic language proficiency and the linguistic demands they faced. As for teaching in Dutch as a second language (DSL), curricula were rewritten and new task-based syllabuses were written on the basis of a corpus study of academic language in secondary education. These syllabuses contain a large number of motivating language tasks in which the vocabulary and syntactic constructions that are typical for language use in science teaching are embedded in a collection of motivating, pedagogical tasks (for more details, see Chapter 4 in this volume). Similarly, for the training of adult unemployed non-native speakers (NNSs) in Flemish VDAB vocational training centres, task-based DSL-syllabuses were developed. For instance, the task-based language syllabus *The Lift* (Bultynck *et al.*, 2003) aimed to familiarize adult unemployed NNSs with the Dutch technical language they were to encounter in vocational training preparing them for a job in administration. The tasks in this syllabus aim to have a strong element of reality, adding to the adult students' involvement, as they are believed to attach great importance to the direct usefulness of the contents offered in the DSL classes. Working with *The Lift*, the NNSs have to imagine that they are an employee of a (fictitious) company. The NNSs are asked to perform tasks such as writing an e-mail to invite their fictitious colleagues to a staff meeting or discuss the planning of a fictitious staff party. These task-based DSL syllabuses were published and introduced to the VDAB language teachers during inservice training programmes. The teachers participated in these programmes and started using the syllabuses on a voluntary basis.

Concurrently, a support programme was implemented for science teachers in secondary education and technical instructors/vocational trainers in adult DSL vocational training. This support mainly consisted of inservice trainings and coaching sessions during which technical instructors and science teachers were sensitized to become aware of how the language they used might function as an obstacle to learning. However, the support programme did not encourage teachers and trainers to abandon the use of academic and abstract language altogether. Expert language does allow for precise and unambiguous messages during communication. Secondly, anyone aiming to address the world from a scientific, abstract or technological perspective cannot do without a particular use of language. Another reason why teachers, especially in secondary education, should not avoid academic language altogether is that young people, in the end, need to learn to handle this kind of language anyway. Whether in secondary education, higher education, in various domains in society (including the media), or even at work, people who cannot deal with academic or technical language are at a serious disadvantage. So, the support programme for science teachers and technical trainers focused on the *efficient* use of subject language. During inservice training sessions, in which teachers and vocational trainers from different schools and centres participated, the participants were informed about the 'linguistic problem' their students might face and were given a number of practical suggestions to keep in mind while teaching. Figure 2 overleaf shows what these suggestions looked like in the early years of the training programme.

## 2.2 *Revising the dual-track programme*

Experience showed that the double support programme (focusing on language and subject teachers) had to be refined, as it did not have the desired results. The vocational trainers in adult education found it hard to transfer the principles in Figure 2 to their actual practice in the classroom or on the training floor. For them, the gap between the abstract pedagogical principles they were offered during the inservice training and their own reality on the training floor appeared to be vast.

In response to this criticism, a training programme of 'video-coaching on the floor' was developed. In this support programme, the technical trainers first have to prepare a lesson they are going to give to their NNS trainees. The technical trainers describe to their coach in detail, what they will do, what problems they expect (for instance what language is likely to be difficult for the learners) and how they

**Ten tips on how to deal with technical language**

1  Be fully aware of the language you use while teaching. You need language to instruct your students. Never forget you are working with students with a relatively low level of Dutch language proficiency.
2  Try to fine tune the level of complexity of the language you use to the students' level of proficiency.
3  For each part of the instruction, ask yourself whether the information can be conveyed orally. If students are presented with new information, try to demonstrate or illustrate what you say. Make sure your written material is comprehensible.
4  Only transmit subject knowledge that is essential. Your student does not need to know as much about the subject as you do. Skills are more essential than factual knowledge.
5  Be aware that the knowledge you present may be culturally biased.
6  Try to shorten the written texts you use. Make implicit relations between sentences, and different parts of the text, explicit.
7  Beware of stretches of language that contain too much information. Be elaborate.
8  Allow your students to learn by discovering things for themselves. Stimulate your learners to try and solve problems themselves. Support them in doing so by referring to previous experiences, and negotiating meaning with them. Explain why new knowledge is relevant for the students.
9  If you require your students to listen to or read an instruction or exposé, set a listening (or reading) goal or assignment first. Make sure your students have a reason for listening to or reading the instructions.
10  Check comprehension by asking closed or open questions. Work with closed questions if answering open questions is too difficult for the students.

**Figure 2**  Tips given to technical trainers and science teachers during inservice training on the role of language in content teaching

are going to respond to these problems should they arise. In a second step of the coaching programme, the lesson is actually given and videotaped. In a third step, the videotape is discussed by the vocational trainer and the coach. This discussion is supposed to help the trainer to observe and reflect upon their own behaviour (including the language they used), to unravel the rationale behind their choices, to look for alternatives to things that did not work out and to be reassured about the things that went well.

In a similar vein, the language teachers who tried to work with the task-based DSL syllabuses were observed during their language

lessons, after which a feedback session was organized, aiming to make the language teachers reflect on their pedagogical behaviour. Research showed that these coaching sessions on the floor proved to have a stronger impact on actual teacher behaviour than theoretical, collective inservice training sessions (Devlieger *et al*., 2003; see also Chapter 10 in this volume). However, this highly individualized and intensive format of coaching turned out to be extremely costly and time-consuming.

Another problem that arose with the early support strategy had to do with the barriers between the linguistic strand (as realized in the DSL courses) and the technical/scientific strands in the curricula. For teachers and learners alike, the links between the DSL courses and the technical courses were not always clear. Duran's (1994) and Linsen's (1994) studies into the implementation of DSL courses in language education show that some language teachers did not perceive the tasks in the task-based language syllabuses, many of which were built up around topics the students were fascinated by (such as dinosaurs and hidden treasures; also see Chapter 4 in this volume) as a proper preparation for the hard, 'serious' work that their students were supposed to carry out in the other subjects, but rather as 'playtime'. For them, it appeared hard to see how motivating texts on dinosaurs and UFOs might have any learning potential in terms of academic language learning. In the DSL courses for adult education (e.g. *The Lift*), this problem appeared to be circumvented, since the syllabus developers opted for realistic tasks, but this choice led to other problems, some of which were purely practical. For instance, in one of the activities in *The Lift*, the students have to comprehend written instructions on the computer in order to place an order online. Since they are preparing for a vocational training in the field of administration, this task, at first sight, seems to be of direct relevance to the students. However, in the average DSL classroom, there are no computers available, so the students have to work with material on paper. So, in this task, rather than actually placing the order online, the students are asked to put paper copies of computer screen images in the right order.

To a minimal extent, this can be compensated for by including 'practical assignments on the floor' in the DSL course (Vanherf & Depauw, 2000; Lanssens *et al*., 2001), stimulating the students to perform tasks in authentic situations on the vocational training floor or in the workplace that involve authentic interaction with Dutch-speaking colleagues or students, with their (future) vocational trainers/technical instructors, or with other native speakers. For instance, *The Lift* includes a task asking the adult NNS students to

work together with native speakers (NS) of Dutch who are also following the administration training: the NS–NNS pairs have to check the spelling (on the computer) of a text that was written by the NNS student. The NS student is given the chance to demonstrate his computer skills to the NNS student and to provide the latter with explanations. Both students refine their spelling skills, which are quite essential for some administrative tasks.

All these refinements, however, remain restricted to cautious measures that leave the overall structure intact. The transmission model adopted in the subject teaching (which was described in the first paragraph of this article as potentially giving rise to many learning problems) is not abolished, it is merely improved upon. In fact, using the Dutch language course as a kind of preparation for the 'real' technical/scientific programme actually legitimizes the choice for the transmission model. For science teachers and technical trainers, this is a reasonably safe and economical step to take, for it does not involve fundamental changes in their teaching behaviour, curriculum construction or evaluation practices. These measures are like interior designing: we improve the environment but leave the outer walls of the building intact. Only occasionally, a door is opened to enable contact between the different rooms of the building. In addition, the 'language problem' is still largely attributed to the language learner. The learner is labelled as someone who lacks a basic tool to follow a particular course, so this deficiency first has to be remedied (by a language specialist) before he is allowed to participate.

The question is: will these refinements deal efficiently with the potential learning problems that we have listed above? According to Illich (1971: 72), they will not, since powerful learning experiences typically do not occur within strictly confined environments:

> The same people, paradoxically, when pressed to specify how they acquired what they know and value, will readily admit that they learned it more often outside than inside school. Their knowledge of facts, their understanding of life and work came to them from friendship or love, while viewing TV, or while reading, from examples of peers or the challenge of a street encounter.

Illich's quote points to the need of a fundamental reinterpretation of the transmission model and implies a plea for a conception of powerful learning environments in which learning is situated and a matter of active construction (rather than abstract and passive absorption), in which education is adapted to the needs of the individual learner (rather than vice versa), and in which learning

content, since it is derived from real-life authentic situations, is interdisciplinary rather than divided along sectarian lines. Inspiration on what kind of education results from this philosophy can be drawn from a teacher support programme that was provided, from the mid-1990s, to Flemish primary schools in the field of task-based science teaching.

## 3 Task-based subject teaching

In the mid-1990s, many Flemish primary school teachers started using new task-based, Dutch language syllabuses (see Chapter 4 in this volume for more details). In one province of Flanders, Limburg, the schools implementing these syllabuses were supported by a staff of school counsellors funded by the provincial government. In this region, the implementation of the task-based language teaching method had a quick backwash effect on the teaching of other subjects in the curriculum, especially science teaching. Some teachers, experimenting with task-based activities during their course of 'Dutch', became dissatisfied with the more explicit, transmission-mode, teacher-dominated methodology in the other subjects, but did not find it straightforward to transfer the task-based principles they adopted during Dutch language teaching to the other subjects. Their dissatisfaction with their teaching practices was aggravated by the publication of new official attainment targets for science teaching, issued by the Flemish government in the second half of the 1990s. In these, relatively little emphasis was placed on the knowledge of bare facts and far more on the development of real-life skills, self-exploratory practice and profound personal insights.

The Limburg provincial school counsellors decided to support teachers in the field of science teaching as well. An experimental project was set up, involving the cooperation of the school (educational) counsellors, the Centre for Language and Education (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven) and six teachers. Together, they embarked upon a pedagogical experiment, involving the development and experimental implementation of six task-based projects for science teaching. For three consecutive school years (from 1996–7 until 1998–9), two task-based science projects per year were developed. Each project consisted of a number of classroom activities that were linked together by a common theme (e.g.'Middle Ages', 'learning how to learn') (Van Gorp, 2000b). The first drafts of the experimental projects were written by professional syllabus developers at the university centre. On the basis of the teachers' feedback, the projects were further refined, after which all the parties involved

were to decide whether the experience with the six experimental projects warranted further spread of the activities throughout the province.

The development of each new project was an example of a negotiated curriculum (Nunan, 1988). It was inspired by the questions that the previous project(s) had raised, in order to ensure that the six experimental teachers could take further steps in their own learning process. As a result, each of the projects focused on different subject matter content, different attainment targets and experimented with new methodological formats. For instance, one of the questions the teachers found themselves struggling with after running the first projects was whether the pupils acquired enough scientific knowledge with this task-based method. Teachers were quite convinced of the profit in terms of skills, but were under the impression that the children did not develop basic knowledge. At the end of the third project 'Here come the Middle Ages', therefore, tests were developed, which were to be administered immediately after the project had been rounded off, and then again three months later. The results of these tests, which included both curriculum-dependent and curriculum-independent items, reassured the teachers.

Experimenting with the six projects, the teachers had the opportunity to build up certain teacher skills 'by doing' and to become more readily acquainted with task-based science education. As it turned out, the basic principles behind this approach not only had much in common with the basic principles of task-based language teaching, but also with the educational philosophy, based on social constructivism (De Corte, 1998; Steffe & Gale, 1995) that the Flemish government and the educational regional boards were promoting at the time (Van Gorp, 1999a; Bogaert & Van Gorp, 2000). This is illustrated in an article on the Limburg experiment that appeared in *Klasse* (October 1999), the monthly educational magazine financed by the Flemish government and distributed free to all teachers in Flanders. Figure 3 is an excerpt from the article.

The activity described in the article was observed in a Year 6 classroom (11–12-year-olds) of a teacher who had only recently become acquainted with the task-based science projects. The project consists of a number of activities having to do with the Middle Ages, one of which focuses on the workings of levers. The teacher confronts the pupils with a problem: 'how could armies conquer the mighty castles built by knights?' In their attempts to answer this intriguing question, the pupils draw on the knowledge of the world they already possess on this topic. As the active explorers of the world that they are naturally, they have gathered a wide array of skills and know-

Seventeen children from the sixth year of school (11–12-year olds) are working in groups of four. 'What does a medieval castle look like?' Hubert Crals, the teacher, asks. The pupils mention a number of features: 'strongly built', 'with a moat around the castle'. 'What would you need to conquer such a castle?' the teacher asks. 'A canon', Toeba answers. 'A catapult!' Rebecca shouts. That is the signal to start the video. The pupils watch two fragments from documentaries on the crusades. The pupils are asked to perform a task while watching the video: compare the catapults that are demonstrated in both fragments. Ten minutes later, the pupils explain about the differences. Then the teacher gives another assignment: 'Work together in pairs, and build a catapult with which you can hit the target (i.e. the blackboard).' The pupils gather all sorts of materials from the handicraft atelier, return to the class and start working with wooden slats, toilet rolls, table tennis balls, tape. Ten minutes later, the pupils test out their catapult. They describe how they have gone about designing and constructing them. When they miss their target, the teacher asks them why this is the case. The technological principles 'weight', 'power' and 'fulcrum' are mentioned. The pupils look for concrete household applications of these principles, and compare pairs of scissors with tin openers and the light switch. On a working sheet, they assign 'power' and 'fulcrum' to different drawings of all sorts of objects.

In this lesson, the children took at least 75 percent of the speaking time. They learnt Dutch, history and physics.

**Figure 3**    Excerpt from *Klasse*, the monthly magazine issued to teachers by the Flemish Ministry of Education. (From: *Klasse*, no. 98, October 1999; our translation)

ledge throughout their lives. However, their current knowledge and skills may not suffice to solve this puzzle immediately. Task-based science teaching typically elicits interesting problems that confront the pupils with the limits of their current skills and knowledge, and with the insight that their current theories of the world are not fit to explain everything.

In the example above, the problem that is raised motivates the pupils to try and unravel the technological principles that drive the operation of catapults. At this point in the activity, the teacher could easily have shifted to a theoretical explanation about levers and catapults. Actually, this is quite common practice when it comes to teaching history or physics. The role of motivation is reduced to the introduction of the lesson, after which the lesson returns to being an ordinary teacher-dominated science lesson. However, as the description of the activity in Figure 3 shows, in task-based science education, the pupils' motivation to inquire, to take initiative, to try and find

solutions to their problems remains the driving force throughout the whole activity, or at least this is strived for (Dörnyei, 2002; Rueda & Dembo, 1995; Van Lier, 1996; see also Chapter 4 on motivation). The pupils remain the active explorers of the world throughout the activity.

Task-based science education capitalizes on the basic idea of 'learning by experience'. Learning is a fundamentally constructive process: what we learn, is what we mentally construct for ourselves (De Corte, 1998) or together with others. It is supposed, that by looking for a solution themselves, and working together while doing so, the pupils will learn. What they have discovered for themselves may have greater impact on their minds than what they merely have been told. As such, the projects provide an answer to Kinsella's critique that content-based instruction is often too teacher-driven and fails to create independent learners (Kinsella, 1997).

In task-based science teaching, learners gradually move from concrete experiences to abstract insights at a higher level. Conceptual change is induced by integrating everyday and scientific perspectives (Wiser & Amin, 2001). By constructing a catapult themselves, trying it out and evaluating its effects, the pupils nudge their way towards a deeper understanding of general scientific principles, which they find are applicable in many different situations. Similarly, in a task developed for secondary maths education, learners build up a gradual understanding of the concept of involution from concrete cases such as choosing between receiving a huge amount of money right away or starting with a very modest amount which is doubled each week for a full year (Bogaert & Van Gorp, 2000). Or, in a task-based chemistry lesson developed for secondary education, the students watch a video report on an oil disaster, and have to figure out why the oil remains floating on top of the sea water. First, many of the students tend to claim that oil is lighter than water, but when they conduct an experiment to verify this, their hypothesis proves to be wrong, constituting a further step in discovering the complex principles of polarity. In all these examples, the pupils build a bridge, slowly but surely, between a tactile experience in the here-and-now to abstract principles that cross the barriers of time and space.

Throughout the activity, they use language to support their explorative activities, to verbalize the hypotheses they are building up, to comment on the other group members' ideas and to defend their own positions. They are 'talking science' (Lemke, 1990). So, rather than functioning as an obstacle for learning, language becomes a powerful tool for exploration and learning:

> What is at issue here is the shifting of emphasis from language as an instrument of teaching to language as a means of learning and a tool for thinking. This shift of emphasis entails a much more active use of talking, listening, reading and writing than has been usual in science teaching.
>
> (Hodson, 1998: 154)

The result of these activities may be cognitive restructuring, which typically comes about through interaction and negotiation in authentic social contexts (Hodson, 1998). In this respect, Brown and Palincsar (1989: 395) stress that conceptual growth: 'is more likely when one is required to explain, elaborate, or defend one's position to others, as well as to oneself; striving for an explanation often makes a learner integrate and elaborate knowledge in new ways.'

As illustrated in Figure 4, the teachers involved in the Limburg task-based experiments were not only convinced of the increased efficiency of their science teaching, but also saw much potential profit in terms of simultaneously raising the pupils' Dutch academic language proficiency. In other words, task-based activities like these can turn into a powerful learning activity for science and for language learning at the same time (Doughty and Varela, 1998; Snow, 1998; Wesche and Skehan, 2002).

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'Before, the children did not really understand me,' Hubert Crals (one of the teachers in the experiment) explains. 'And their assignments did not amount to much. The tasks have not become easier now, and I haven't changed anything about the vocabulary that I use, but I provide them with more elaborate explanations, ask them to paraphrase the instructions they are given, or to explain the meaning of a word to each other. In this way, the academic language becomes more accessible. Furthermore, the pupils have become more orally proficient because they receive far more chances to speak and act than they used to. They communicate more, and are no longer afraid to come and ask for help. We are using the syllabuses in a different way too. Not as the application or the written version of my oral explanation, but as a starting point. I used to be a teacher, now I am a coach. I have more work than I used to have, my colleagues think I am crazy. But the job satisfaction is much higher, the number of pupils not passing the grade has decreased, the pupils are more highly motivated, and most of them do well in secondary education. The pupils who used to have many learning problems profit from this approach particularly, whereas previously they did not participate and were hardly active.'

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**Figure 4**    Excerpt from *Klasse*. (From: *Klasse*, no. 98, October 1999; our translation)

In Figure 5, another teacher who was involved in running the experimental task-based science projects, describes another activity:

'One day I sent my pupils walking around in the school. Following a certain route, and solving all kinds of tasks and problems, the pupils had to draw a map of the school building. They asked the other teachers and the administrative staff for all kinds of information, defined the different types of rooms, indicated certain objects on the plan. In short, they were on a kind of exploratory expedition in their own school. Later, we established links with real discoverers. The pupils worked together in groups of four. One task involved each pupil reading a text that the other members of the group did not have, so four different texts were involved. To answer the questions accompanying the texts, the group had to use all the information. This inspired every single member to actively participate and to be assertive. This part was all about learning to cooperate. Moreover, I switched roles within the group, to ensure that leadership varied. Learning to direct, learning to report, learning to exchange information . . .: in the end, these tasks and the project theme aimed at the development of social, technical and linguistic goals. The expeditions provided a nice framework and this was not even the essence of the whole project . . .'

**Figure 5**    Excerpt from *Klasse*. (From: *Klasse*, no. 76, June 1997; our translation)

As can be inferred from Figure 5, in science projects, a common theme or a story line (Egan, 1989; Letschert, 1995) has the power to create a meaningful framework, increasing the functionality of the separate activities. Designing a compass, cleansing water or learning how to read maps in an atlas all become part of the skills an explorer should possess. Different attainment targets, traditionally assigned to different disciplines, are no longer treated in isolation, but are linked to each other in authentic contexts. In integrating language learning with concept and science learning, this task-based approach is in line with content-based language learning (Snow & Brinton, 1997; Mohan & Beckett, 2003), Romance and Vitale's (2001) in-depth applications of science model (IDEAS), and the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA), created by Chamot and O'Malley (1994).

As Figures 4 and 5 testify, the teacher's role changes in these approaches. Freed from the role to transmit and verbalize all relevant content themselves, teachers can now focus on the learner's explorative process, support them in solving problems, nudge them towards solutions by helping them to think aloud, ask stimulating questions

and challenge their hypotheses (see also Chapters 8 and 9 in this volume, on the role of the teacher). In setting up this kind of negotiation, the teacher can also support the learners in attaching particular linguistic forms to their meaning construction, editing, 'scientific discourse' in this way, together with the students (Mohan and Beckett, 2003). Suitable academic language is 'grafted' onto the learners' own explorations and problem-solving behaviour, and onto the explorative language they use in order to meet the interesting challenges they are confronted with.

## 4  Towards designing a school language policy

It is claimed that the implementation of task-based subject matter teaching (or content-based education) in schools has better chances of success when it is not restricted to a handful of highly motivated teachers working in isolation, but is taken up instead by the whole school team (Stoller, 2004). When teachers belonging to the same school team become strongly divided over this issue, a wide disparity within the same school or centre may develop as far as teaching practices, choice of syllabuses and criteria for assessment (among others) are concerned. For the learners, this may add to confusion as to what their teachers expect from them, what criteria will be used in assessment, etc.

Support programmes such as the Flemish ones discussed above, in which individual teachers are introduced to new pedagogical approaches and are invited to work with new syllabuses may actually give rise, or add, to this kind of disparity, especially when the 'smooth transition strategy' is chosen. This strategy takes as its starting point that teachers should not be forced into taking big steps in terms of changing their classroom behaviour. Rather than the trainer or coach, the teachers should be the ones who set the pace and who, eventually, decide upon the content of the innovation programme. Devlieger *et al.* (2003), who studied the implementation of task-based education in Brussels primary schools, found that the 'smooth transition strategy' soon highlighted vast differences among different teachers' beliefs and practices in some school teams. The teachers who were open to task-based teaching even before the support programme was set up, were quick to adopt the insights they were offered and to use the task-based syllabuses they were provided with, whereas other teachers showed far more resistance. In the Brussels programme, some school counsellors decided to work more intensively with the teachers who were willing to go along with the

programme, and not to work with those who had strong doubts or vastly differing views. As a result, task-based language teaching was implemented in one year of a school, whereas in the classes of the previous or following year, 'focus on forms' or transmission-type programmes prevailed (for more details on this implementation study, see Chapter 10 in this volume).

This disparity may be (partially) compensated for if, besides attempting to raise the professional competence of individual teachers, the support programme also aims at involving the whole school team in a fundamental reflection on the overall language policy of the school or centre (Corson, 1990). Teachers and staff should have the opportunity to talk with each other, reflect together, try and understand each other's practice and move as a learning community towards an approximation of the school's conceptions of best practice (McLaughlin, 1998; Richards, 2003; Richards & Lockhart, 1994). In Gilzow's & Branaman's analysis (2003), 'shared commitment' among the school staff was among the key factors determining the success of educational innovation projects focusing on second language education and content-based programmes. Another key to success depended upon teamwork among language teachers, subject teachers, administrators, headteachers and other parties involved.

In essence, designing a school language policy is, first and foremost, a matter of communication: all the members of the team discuss, reflect upon and exchange views and experiences on the role of language in the educational programme (Christison & Stoller, 1997; Davidson & Tesh, 1997). For some teachers, this need not immediately result in concrete actions or a fundamental change of their classroom behaviour. School language policy planning primarily aims to stimulate team members to gradually construct a common and coherent view on how 'the educational programme and practice can be adapted to the language learning needs of the students with a view to promoting their personal development and increasing their chances of success in school' (Van den Branden, 2004).

The literature on school language policy (Christison and Stoller, 1997; Corson, 1990; Kroon & Vallen, 2000) recommends that the team's common view, or their efforts towards developing one, should be written down in a policy plan. This plan should include:

1 *Explicit learning goals for the learners*. Language policy plans should start from a fundamental consideration of the ultimate attainment targets that the school or programme aims to reach with the learners. In other words, for each learner in an educational programme, a basic question should be asked: what are the skills,

attitudes and knowledge that the learner should have acquired at the end of the programme? The result of this analysis i.e. a detailed list of goals, becomes the starting point of the programme and remains the permanent standard for evaluation and assessment.

2  *Analysis of ends and means*. The next question that needs to be answered by the team is: in what way, with which means and in which period of time can the learners be enabled maximally to profit from the learning environment they are offered by the educational institution? In this analysis, it is not only the features of the present educational context that have to be considered (such as available syllabuses and organizational structures), but also the characteristics, needs and worries of the learners. Good intake or assessment procedures, for instance, can establish what particular skills (language, technical and other) learners already possess and which ones they do not. This, in turn, may protect learners from being trapped in a course that is not suited to their needs, interests or capabilities. In this respect, different parts ('courses') of the educational programme, including the language course, need to be compared with each other, controlled for overlap or artificial divisions and described and assessed in terms of their relative contribution to reaching the predetermined goals for learners. This kind of reflection may lead to more integrated views on learning and education among teachers of different subjects. For instance, in a Brussels centre for adult education preparing NNS students for employment in Dutch-speaking child daycare centres (De Groof, 2003), different team members found out during a staff meeting that they had all noticed that the students always reverted to gestures and sign language in order to communicate with the children. The language teacher and the pedagogical trainer agreed that stimulating the NNS students to talk more with the children would be good both for their own acquisition of Dutch and for a higher quality of stimulation for, and communication with, the children. This consensus on shared goals constituted a strong basis for joint, integrated educational activities in the future.

3  *Plan to promote cooperation between staff members*. Implementing an educational programme requires cooperation and deliberation between all the staff members who are involved. In many centres and schools, this is arranged on a quite formal level. For instance, in adult education centres, regular staff meetings between the language teacher and the vocational trainer can be set up. However, these structures should not become an end in their own right. By allowing or stimulating more opportunities for

occasional and informal consultations, formal structures may even become irrelevant. For instance, by providing the language teacher a classroom in the immediate surroundings of the technical training floor, they can easily notice what happens during the vocational training. Likewise, an informal chat between a language teacher and a technical trainer who vents his frustrations after having failed to explain the workings of a particular machine to his NNS students may reveal far more relevant information to the language teacher than a formal meeting at the end of the month. A climate that allows for these kinds of deliberations may eventually give rise to team-teaching. During this time the language teacher and the technical instructor can operate together on the training floor and share the burden of educating their students. Apart from the fact that, in this way, the two teachers can combine their expertise and may find themselves in optimal conditions to elaborate further their professional repertoire by reflecting on their own and each other's behaviour, the two teachers can also share the workload of catering for the learning needs of individual learners. While the language teacher will devote more attention to the learners who have difficulties coping with the language of the task at hand, the technical instructor will devote personal attention to students who have difficulties coping with technical aspects.

4 *Staff development plan*. Language policy plans should also aim to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the team in terms of their professional competence. In the end, all the staff members are, and should remain, learners too. They have the right to acknowledge that some of the competencies that are needed to offer training or education of a high quality to their students are beyond their current capabilities. It is, then, up to the team to set priorities and take appropriate actions (e.g. organize training programmes) to allow individual, or groups of, staff members to elaborate their professional expertise.

If the strength of a chain is equal to its weakest link, schools and centres for adult education have much to gain from investing in joint planning and deliberation and in actions that are jointly taken and assessed. Language policy plans are not an end in their own right, they merely serve to strengthen the collective potential of the school team. If learners can profit from interaction in holistic and authentic situations, so, ultimately, can staff members.

## 5    Conclusions

The terms 'content-based language learning' (Snow & Brinton, 1997), 'language across the curriculum' (Barnes *et al*., 1986; Corson, 1990) and 'task-based content teaching' refer to many different things and have different meanings. They may refer to the fact that language proficiency may be stimulated in any kind of course, not just in the typical 'language course'. They may also refer to the fact that language is not only a subject, but also a medium of instruction used by all teachers. As a result, 'language across the curriculum' also refers to processes of team building and identifying each teacher as a 'language teacher' and as someone who acts with language. This calls for joint reflection and exchange among team members on the role of language in the educational process (Corson, 1990). In this article, we have tried to show that all these different meanings should not be treated in isolation from each other, lest they give rise to erecting, maintaining or strengthening barriers between different disciplines, different staff members and between education and reality. For the benefit of the learner, it might be far more rewarding to take up all these challenges in an integrated way and to strive for 'the creation of a new style of educational relationship between man and his environment' (Illich, 1971), one in which the learners' attempts to systematize new behaviour and knowledge is the point of departure of educational action, rather than the sacrosanct, rigid systems of scientific knowledge and educational organization that teachers are so familiar with.

# 6 Task-based language teaching and ICT: Developing and assessing interactive multimedia for task-based language teaching

Walter Schrooten

## 1 Introduction

The potential benefits of integrating information and communication technology (ICT) into language education seem vast. Pachler (1999) refers to a compendium of research findings published by the British National Council for Educational Technology (NCET, 1994), in which 27 claims with regard to the potential of ICT are listed. Scanning through this list and the ICT-related literature (Beatty, 2003; Chapelle, 1998; Doughty & Long, 2003; Hughes, 2000; Levy, 1997; Skehan, 2003; Warschauer, 1996; Warschauer & Kern, 2000), the potential of ICT for language learning can be summarized as follows:

1 ICT allows a high degree of differentiation. Individual needs and abilities can easily be accommodated.
2 Working with ICT elicits a high degree of learner motivation and involvement.
3 ICT offers enriched content and allows a more intense, multi-sensory learning process.
4 ICT makes teaching more efficient, since the teacher can focus more on supporting learners rather than having to focus on providing content.

In view of the fact that the integration of ICT in language education is a reasonably young trend, most of the above-mentioned claims remain to be empirically substantiated. In the field of language teaching, the introduction of ICT is slowly but surely gaining ground, but questions remain as to whether this should be met with great enthusiasm or great scepticism. Scepticism predominated in the conclusions of a research study analysing the quality of ICT tools for language education at the level of primary school in Flanders (Schrooten, 1997): most of the tools that were available at that time

turned out to be of the 'drill & practice' type. This study clearly indicated that the bold theoretical assumptions about the potential of ICT are not always consistent with the quality of tools available on the educational market.

In this chapter, I want to show how interactive multimedia can be used in task-based language teaching (TBLT). Integrating the use of computers in TBLT is not self-evident, since the principles underlying a lot of currently available educational software seem to be flatly opposed to the principles of task-based language learning. On the basis of a number of classroom observations and of our own experiences in evaluating and developing software, I aim to shed some light on:

- the type of software relevant for the task-based classroom;
- the potential of this software for task-based language learning;
- the methodology associated with using 'task-based' educational software in the classroom.

First, I need to make some preliminary remarks on terminology. The term CALL (computer assisted language learning) has been around for quite a while. The phrases 'multimedia' and 'ICT' are fairly recent additions to the ever expanding – and often impenetrable – forest of CALL-related terminology. ICT (information and communication technology) is a general term, encompassing a diversity of applications ranging from the internet, e-mail and video-conferencing to educational software. 'Multimedia' refers to a particular characteristic of an ICT-application i.e. the integrated display of a variety of media formats and information types including video, photographs, text, graphics, animation, sound, etc.

## 2  Multimedia tools for language teaching: task-based?

In this section, I will discuss the major principles underlying the development of task-based multimedia tools for language learning. I will do this first at a conceptual level, drawing on the available literature and then illustrate these principles with an example.

### 2.1  Criteria for the evaluation of multimedia tools

Wilson (1992: 186) defines an interactive multimedia learning environment as one allowing:

> the electronically integrated display and user control of a variety of media formats and information types, including

motion video and film, still photographs, text, graphics, animation, sound, numbers and data. The resulting interactive experience for the user is a multidimensional, multi-sensory interweave of self-directed reading, viewing, listening, and interacting, through activities such as exploring, searching, manipulating, writing, linking, creating, juxtaposing, and editing.

A number of these features, notably the exploratory, self-directed and multi-sensory character of an interactive multimedia learning environment appear to be closely related to the features of effective language learning tasks. In their search for optimal psycholinguistic environments for distance foreign language learning, Doughty & Long (2003) propose ten methodological principles which they find are crucial in the task-based philosophy and which might be used as criteria to evaluate the quality (in terms of language learning potential) of multimedia environments. These ten principles are:

 1  use tasks, not texts, as the unit of analysis;
 2  promote learning by doing;
 3  elaborate input (do not simplify, do not rely solely on 'authentic' texts);
 4  provide rich (not impoverished) input;
 5  encourage inductive ('chunk') learning;
 6  focus on form;
 7  provide negative feedback;
 8  respect 'learner syllabuses'/developmental processes;
 9  promote cooperative/collaborative learning;
10  individualize instructions (according to communicative needs and psycholinguistically).

These criteria make clear that in order to create rich-potential multimedia environments for language learning, the designer will have to take into account the content of the activities that the students are confronted with and the nature of the interaction they give rise to. Clearly, first of all, the multimedia activities should provide interesting and relevant content (cf. Doughty & Long's principle 1). With adult learners, this may be closely linked to their language learning goals i.e. to the real-life situations in which they need to or want to use the target language. Roughly speaking, the closer the world presented in the task resembles the 'real world' in which the learner will have to function, the more likely they are to experience real involvement with the tasks. For adult learners, especially, the authenticity of ICT tasks may be a crucial factor.

Obviously, multimedia offer plenty of opportunities to move closer towards reality and the target tasks learners are supposed to perform there. Simulating, for instance, a working environment by means of a clever combination of graphics, sound and video is perfectly possible. Even when there are a lot of financial (and consequently technical) limitations to what can be achieved in terms of 'closeness to reality', with the simplest means a situation, that without multimedia would require an elaborate description by the teacher, can be brought to life on the computer screen. For many learners, this could facilitate the process of identifying with the situation and engaging in tasks associated with a particular role in the context presented.

As was discussed by Van Gorp and Bogaert in Chapter 4 of this volume, tasks should be motivating in that they incite the learner to invest mental energy into task performance and 'learning by doing' (principle 2), and into comprehending the input and producing output that accompanies it (principles 2–5). Clearly, multimedia environments have a number of features, such as attractive graphics and sounds, that can launch the learner into action. However, the user's involvement in a multimedia driven learning experience should go beyond the 'first impression effect' of dazzling graphics or stunning sound effects. As Dörnyei's (2002) process-oriented model emphasizes, the motivation to do a task should be strong enough to last throughout the process of task performance and to keep the learner going even when the task is difficult or when obstacles arise. This implies that the learner has set clear task-oriented goals for himself, finds it worthwhile to pursue these goals and is confident that performance of the task will be, in some way, successful (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001; Rueda & Dembo, 1995).

As much as the authenticity of the content may add to the appeal of a task, task-designers should also take care that the language use that is expected from the learners resembles what is expected from them in real-life performance. Language learners should be offered the chance to develop and practise their language learning skills in 'real operating conditions' (Johnson, 1995). If real-life tasks require complex mental and interactional effort involving a combination of different linguistic skills, then so should pedagogical tasks. The multi-sensory character of interactive multimedia makes it relatively easy to develop tasks that address both reading and listening skills at the same time. Contrary to popular belief, productive skills can also be developed using computer-based material. In several cases, what happens on the computer screen is an ideal starting point for

interaction between students, or between the teacher and the students (Gonzalez-Lloret, 2003; Mohan, 1992; Underwood, 1984).

Imagine a very common situation. You are editing a text with a word processor, and at some point you want to add a table to your document. If you are not exactly sure how to do this, you could of course consult the manual or the computer's help function, but a very natural reflex would be to turn to a colleague in the office next door and ask for assistance. Most probably (unless you are not on speaking terms), this colleague will sit down next to you at the computer. They will probably ask you what you want to achieve. If they know their way around with a word processor, your colleague will show you how to add and edit a table, while performing the appropriate actions on the computer, so you can actually see what they are talking about. If your colleague is not very proficient when it comes to putting tables in documents, the two of you will probably try to figure out how to do it by trial and error. The fact that you can try out several strategies, watching the effects on the screen, makes it very easy to discuss and assess different hypotheses with regard to inserting tables in texts. This example shows how interaction and feedback are brought about in a very natural way if two people engage in an ICT-driven problem-solving activity (principle 9).

As the example shows, in order for meaningful interaction to take place, a challenging problem-solving situation in which both learners are willing to engage can be highly facilitative. The possibilities for setting up complex interactions between diverse information units on the computer (texts, photos, etc.) allow for the construction of cognitively demanding tasks without overloading both teacher and learner with organizational problems. In addition, the physical links that exist between information units on the computer can correspond to relations between information units that are relevant for solving the task, hence supporting the teacher when he tries to figure out what a student is thinking while trying to perform the task.

Van Gorp & Bogaert (Chapter 4 in this volume) further emphasize that tasks should confront users with a gap between their current language proficiency and the language proficiency needed to perform the task. Learners should 'stretch their muscles' if they want to expand their target language skills. Ideally speaking, then, tasks should allow each individual learner the opportunity to do so. However, there are two basic problems with this argument. First, we do not know what exactly constitutes task complexity (Robinson, 2001b; Skehan, 2001; see also Chapter 3 in this volume). Prabhu (1987) even suggests that no syllabus of generalized tasks can identify or anticipate all the sources of challenge to particular learners.

Secondly, in classes around the world, even those in which learners of a particular level of language proficiency are grouped together, differences between individual levels of proficiency may still be relatively big. Taken together, these two arguments suggest that developing ICT tasks that suit different learners' needs may be virtually impossible. Ellis (2003), however, concludes that this need not be troublesome. Since task-based syllabuses are of the non-interventionist type, not seeking to dictate what linguistic forms a learner will learn at any time, the need to ensure a precise match between the teaching and the learner's syllabus no longer arises. In addition, fine-tuning tasks to the individual learners' needs does not rely solely on the syllabus developer, but can be shared with those (students, teacher) who implement the task in the classroom.

Nevertheless, interactive multimedia have a lot to offer when it comes to tuning language input to learner's needs (principles 8 and 10). The same basic material can be used by learners with different levels of proficiency if the task-developer makes sure that there are enough supportive resources that can be consulted at the learner's initiative. Learner support can be offered at several levels and in several ways, including the option of focusing on particular forms that are essential or typical for the tasks that the learners are confronted with (principle 6) and various options for the provision of negative and positive feedback (principle 7). A good programme should be flexible with regard to user preferences when it comes to support and feedback, since these preferences are a direct reflection of the user's learning needs.

## 2.2  From principles to practice: an example

An example will illustrate the points discussed in the previous section. The example is inspired by a multimedia course for basic Dutch as a second language (DSL) (called *Bonte Was*), that was recently developed at the Centre for Language and Education (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Steunpunt NT2, 2003). Let us suppose adult students in a job training course are confronted with a task in which they have to take part in a job interview. On the computer, this task would typically involve a simulated dialogue in which the student has to listen to (or read) what the interviewer has to say, and then respond in line with the main goal of the task i.e. getting accepted for the job and with the general communicative context i.e. a formal conversation with a superior. To respond, the student will have to choose from a number of possible answers. In this type of dialogue, the selection of a particular answer leads to the

next step in the dialogue i.e. a new utterance from the interviewer. We will have a closer look at two turns:

**Turn 1**
I: So, I see you have undertaken several courses . . .
L: a Yes, I have. I took a computer course and an advanced Dutch course.
b Yes indeed, my previous employer insisted on the staff taking several in-service training programmes.
c Yes I have. Actually, that's what I'm looking for in a new job as well: opportunities to keep developing my professional skills.

When 'a' is selected:
**Turn 2**
I: Yes, I can tell that from your c.v., but are you willing to continue taking in-service training?

When 'b' is selected:
**Turn 2**
I: Oh, so you're not really interested in developing your professional skills?

When 'c' is selected:
**Turn 2**
I: That's nice to hear. We offer a range of training programmes to our employees. Is there any training area that interests you in particular?

Notice that none of the answers (a, b, c) is entirely 'incorrect', leaving the students, if they are working in pairs, the opportunity to discuss which option to select, and thus eliciting meaningful interaction and negotiation. Each answer, however, leads to a slightly different response in the next turn and, eventually, different learners can follow a completely different path through this dialogue (and end up with a different outcome of the interview for that matter). Choosing between the different answers is a matter of deciding on the appropriateness of a particular option in a specific communicative context and on the likelihood that the answer will ultimately lead to a successful completion of the task. Option 'a' in Turn 1, for instance, may be less appropriate, because the question asked by the interviewer is actually a prompt to receive more information on the candidate's professional ambitions. Although option 'a' is perfectly acceptable as such, it will probably lead to a less successful conclusion of the task than option 'c', which acknowledges the implicit meaning of the interviewer's utterance. The same holds true for option 'b', which is even less appropriate in this context, although it is not incorrect from a linguistic point of view, and thus, if selected, does not interrupt the flow of the dialogue.

Since none of the options is, strictly speaking, correct or incorrect,

users can be allowed to explore freely the consequences of selecting different options. The structure of the user-interface should allow them to go several steps back in the dialogue and make other choices, while comparing with their previous choices. Meanwhile, the feedback the programme offers to the learners when making a selection can vary in explicitness. On the most implicit level, the learner goes through the dialogue, relying solely on the responses of the interviewer to decide whether his answer was appropriate. Other learners might want more explicit help and feedback. In the first turn of the dialogue, for instance, a feedback question like 'Do you think employers appreciate employees that are willing to continuously expand their professional skills?' can focus the learner's attention on a particular aspect of the task that is relevant in this turn. Finally, feedback may become even more explicit and indicate that a particular turn is unlikely to lead to a satisfying completion of the task.

The feedback relates directly to task performance with varying degrees of explicitness: it refers to what the user has to do. If some users have trouble understanding the language they need to interpret, they can be offered additional help by means of a digital dictionary or grammar compendium. These resources could also be differentiated according to user preferences. Some learners will be oriented towards the completion of the task at hand. If they look up an unknown lexical item, they will want a quick explanation that allows them to get on with the task. Other learners might approach their language learning process from a more form-focused angle, and so might be interested in explanations that go beyond the context of the task at hand e.g. referring to other uses of a particular word in different contexts.

If these resources are well-designed, flexible and under user control, they will allow a range of learners, with widely differing cognitive styles and levels of proficiency, to work with the same basic material and yet all go through a language learning experience that respects their inner syllabuses. This kind of support does not interfere with, but rather, can be said to further each individual learner's exploratory learning process.

Of course, differentiating in this way only works to the extent that the learner is in control of what is happening during the lessons. Interactive computer-based material can put the user in the driver's seat of the learning process, but only if the program allows the user a considerable amount of freedom and control. The learner's experience of control may actually enhance his sense of self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Vallerand, 1997), which has been shown to

have a positive impact, especially in the case of success, on the learner's task motivation (Dörnyei, 2001a,b; 2002).

## 2.3 Summary

In sum, software for task-based learning should aim to bring about intensive learner involvement and motivation, and should confront the learner with relevant tasks that give rise to meaningful exchange and relevant focus on form. In the paragraphs above, I started from Long and Doughty's methodological principles underlying TBLT, emphasizing that for ICT-applications, the following variables may be crucial:

1 subject matter is interesting and relevant;
2 tasks are authentic at the level of content and with regard to the interactional and the cognitive processes involved;
3 multimedia offer multi-sensory support;
4 the learner is in control of the interactive process;
5 tasks have a problem-solving dimension and incite interaction;
6 tasks cater for different learning styles;
7 task structure, feedback and support do not interfere with the learner's self-determined exploratory process.

## 3 Looking for software

Is this rich potential realized in existing multimedia tools? In the Leonardo project *Workable Languages*, funded by the European Community, the Flemish Service for Employment Exchange (VDAB), which is responsible for the vocational training of the unemployed in Flanders, and the Centre for Language and Education (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven) conducted exploratory research with regard to the potential use of interactive multimedia in Dutch second language courses for adult non-native speakers. The target student population which was involved in this project consisted of adult unemployed non-native speakers (NNS) with no higher education qualifications and possessing only a basic level of proficiency in Dutch. They were enlisted in a combined programme of courses in Dutch as a second language and vocational training leading to new prospects on the Flemish labour market.

An analysis of the existing software packages yielded different types of products. A first category contained programs that could be described as 'behaviouristic'. The roots of these programs lie in what Warschauer (1996) describes as 'the first phase of CALL'. The

programs of that period (1960–70) consisted of repeated 'drill and practice'. The computer seemed the perfect candidate for the title of 'behaviourist tutor of the year', given its capacity for repeating large numbers of standard exercises over and over again. The rationale behind this approach to CALL runs as follows (Warschauer, 1996):

- Repeated exposure to the same (or similar) material is beneficial, or even essential, for learning.
- A computer is ideal for carrying out repeated drills, since the machine does not get bored with presenting the same material, and since it can provide immediate and non-judgemental feedback.
- A computer can present such material on an individualized basis, allowing students to proceed at their own pace and freeing up class time for other activities.

Strikingly, the bulk of the educational software that is currently available for Dutch second language learning is still essentially behaviouristic, even if it is sometimes adorned with flashy graphics and sound effects functioning as 'rewards' for correct answers and 'punishment' for incorrect answers. Even more striking is the fact that, to a large extent, the case for CALL continues to be made on the basis of the arguments listed above. However plausible they may seem from a behaviouristic perspective, they are problematic when used to justify the use of a computer in a task-based approach.

This type of software thus failed on several of the criteria mentioned in the previous section. First, the subject matter was insufficiently interesting and relevant when compared to the needs of our target group. The main problem is that curriculum design in these products is driven by considerations related to the linguistic complexity of the content, rather than by the language learning needs of the students. The student is offered linguistic elements and isolated structures or rules, ordered according to an external logic, be it grammatical or semantic. Most of the time, a functional context is completely absent. Consequently, the 'immediate feedback' provided is very much targeted towards the linguistic correctness of the expected answer. Often it simply comes down to an answer that is either 'right' or 'wrong'. Whether this is indicated by a beep or a video-fragment of a person nodding or shaking his head does not make any real difference.

The learner is not in control of the interaction either. A close look at most programs reveals that the order in which material is presented and the way it is presented are not determined by the user's preferences, but by the programme's internal logic, the latter again being dictated by a structure-based view of language. Thus, learners

can indeed decide they want to work on a particular structure or a unit of thematically ordered vocabulary, but due to the rigid structure of most programs, that's it with regard to user initiative and control. When a program has several levels of difficulty, they are generally defined on the basis of linguistic complexity.

Though much of the existing software is still in this behaviourist vein, there has been some evolution towards other types of CALL. As a reaction to the formality of behaviouristic CALL, the 1970s and 1980s saw the emergence of 'communicative CALL'. Warschauer refers to Underwood (1984), who lists a number of features of 'communicative CALL'. According to Underwood, communicative CALL:

- focuses on the use of linguistic forms rather than on the forms themselves;
- teaches grammar implicitly rather than explicitly;
- allows and encourages students to generate original utterances rather than just manipulate pre-fabricated language;
- does not judge and evaluate everything the students do, or reward them with congratulatory messages, lights or bells;
- avoids telling students they are wrong, and is flexible to a variety of student responses;
- uses the target language exclusively and creates an environment in which using the target language feels natural, both on and off the screen;
- will never try to do anything that a book can do just as well.

Stevens (1989) adds that all CALL courseware should build on intrinsic motivation and foster interactivity (both learner–computer and learner–learner interactivity). Clearly, these features appear to be more in line with task-based learning. However, not every 'communicative' CALL package is actually task-based. For instance, there are a number of skill-practice programs that indeed offer procedural feedback and student control e.g. text reconstruction programs or language games focusing on one particular skill. Although they are definitely more sophisticated than 'drill and practice' tools, these programs do not constitute a real learning environment, but rather function as a practising tool. Students do not acquire new skills or knowledge, they merely practise what they have learnt elsewhere. Moreover, grading of activities is still mostly a matter of grading content according to linguistic complexity.

'Communicative' CALL programs that seem better suited for task-based purposes are those in which the computer functions as a stimulus for the students' self-regulated and exploratory learning.

The aim of these programs is not to have students discover the right answer, but to stimulate discussion, writing and problem solving. This type of software typically includes programs that have not been specifically designed for language learners, but in which language is used to reach a goal that motivates the learner. Adventure games, for instance, lend themselves well to this type of CALL (Devlieger, 2000; Grundy, 1991; Rieber, 1996).

In the end, looking for a suitable software package to use with the second language learners in the above-mentioned VDAB project turned out to be a disappointing enterprise. The few language learning programs that we could find for Dutch as a second language were either behaviouristic or skill-practice. 'Communicative' software in which the computer is a stimulus for learning, engaging learners in an exploratory learning experience and giving them holistic and relevant tasks, while providing them with procedural feedback, was rare or did not meet the specific needs of our target group. Since no suitable programs were available, we set out to develop task-based interactive materials specifically designed for these learners' needs ourselves.

## 4  Developing interactive multimedia

These multimedia activities were developed for a 'general technical' language course offered by VDAB to unemployed adults who already possess a basic level of proficiency in Dutch and now need to prepare for Dutch-medium vocational training. After taking the 'general technical' DSL course, the students enter a more specific language course, the contents of which are closely linked to the demands of the training environment in which they will have to function (e.g. vocational training in the field of electricity, catering, cleaning, etc.). The target group we are dealing with is quite heterogeneous with regard to mother tongue, level of schooling and level of proficiency in Dutch. The majority of the students, however, have no formal education beyond primary school.

The multimedia activities we developed deal with functional language use in work-related situations: getting to know your colleagues, having a formal conversation with the personnel manager, finding your way around an office building, understanding safety regulations, etc. The multimedia activities we designed were put to the test in four VDAB training centres with 36 students. During the computer sessions, the students and the teacher were observed by two researchers. Observations were carried out for four consecutive days. During the sessions, the researchers interacted with both

students and the teacher to assess their experiences. The sessions were followed by an interview with the teacher, in which the learning behaviour of the students and the teacher's own attitude were discussed and analysed.

When we set out to develop our own software, we tried to stick to the blueprint of a task-based multimedia programme described in section 2. However, the difference between theoretical principles and the 'real world' in which creative imagination has to compete with technical and financial limitations immediately became apparent. From the idea of multimedia adventure games, we borrowed the concept of a story frame experienced from the viewpoint of a central character. The computer tasks we developed are linked together by the character of *Victor Pica*, a labourer who, in the course of his first week on a new job, gets to know his new working environment. He meets colleagues with different functions, is introduced to safety procedures, has a conversation with the manager of personnel, etc. By using the concept of a story frame, we wanted to enhance the students' motivation and involvement. To ensure the relevance of the tasks, we based the multimedia scenario on existing paper and pencil syllabuses that had been developed earlier for this 'general technical' level (Creusen & De Niel, 1994; Depauw & De Niel, 2000). To select target tasks for these latter syllabuses, a needs analysis had been carried out (see also Chapter 2 in this volume).

The multimedia activities we developed were meant to be performed by pairs of students. The idea was that students working together should try to reach agreement before answering a question. In this way, we wanted to bring about interaction and negotiation and stimulate language production. The challenge was to develop an interface that was accessible and intriguing at the same time. We wanted to avoid exercises that used the same routines over and over again. We tried to vary both the ways in which content was presented on the screen and the interactive processes that students had to engage in. The examples below should give a rough idea of the diversity of tasks that learners were confronted with.

**Task 1** The students have to read a letter from the company inviting them to their first day at work and specifying whom they have to talk to and where they should go. First, the screen displays the letter and a calendar. Students have to decide when to go to the company (this information is in the letter) by clicking on the correct date on the calendar. After doing so, the screen displays an information board, on which the company's staff-members and their location in the building

are described. Learners have to indicate (by clicking) the person and the location they want to visit, in accordance with the instructions in the letter. When they click on the correct location (the reception desk) they are taken there, otherwise they are referred back to the letter. After several tries, the part of the letter in which the relevant information can be found is highlighted.

**Task 2** A lady behind the reception desk appears on the screen. She explains how to get from the reception to the personnel manager's office. While this explanation is running, a floor-plan of the building is displayed. The learner is then asked to click on the correct office. The oral explanation can be repeated over and over again. A written version is not available. If students click on the wrong spot, they are prompted to listen again to the explanation. After several tries, the sound file is played automatically while the correct route is displayed.

**Task 3** The screen displays the floor plan of the office building and three employees. Clicking on each of these starts a sound file. In these sound files, each of the employees describes the company where he works. The learner has to indicate which description matches the floor plan. A written version of the descriptions can be asked for. Feedback consists of a prompt to listen to the oral explanations again.

**Task 4** First, a video is shown of what happens in a company in case of a fire. The actions to be taken in the case of fire are listed and explained. Learners can replay this video as often as they want during the task. After the video has been played once, the screen displays a number of actions that can be undertaken in case of fire. Some of these are relevant, others are irrelevant or plain ridiculous. Students have to remove the irrelevant actions by clicking on them. Afterwards, the relevant actions have to be put in the correct order by drag-and-drop. Feedback consists of a prompt to look at the video again if the answer is not correct.

**Task 5** Following the previous task, the screen displays a number of events or actions that can cause a fire (thunderstorm, smoking in bed, a short circuit). Students are asked to order these (by drag-and-drop) according to what they believe to be the most frequent causes of fire. After settling on a sequence, they are presented with the correct answer.

These examples show that the screen layout is different for almost each of the above-mentioned tasks. This is because we are trying to simulate a reality that is multi-faceted. The advantage is that the learner is kept alert and inquisitive. However, in order to ensure the transparency of the interface and to avoid learners 'getting lost', the bottom part of the screen remains the same throughout the program. It consists of a yellow bar in which the action that the program expects at a given point is described (e.g. 'Click the correct answer') and also shows three icons: a question mark, an ear and a piece of paper with pencil. By clicking on these icons, the user can call up additional information. The question mark allows the user to look up certain words in a digital dictionary. Clicking on the ear causes a sound file to be (re)played, and clicking on the 'paper and pencil' displays a written version of a spoken text. These two icons are only activated if this is in line with the main objective of the task. For instance, if the purpose of a task is the development of listening comprehension (e.g. Task 2), a written version of a text is not offered.

The tasks we designed were based on the tasks students are expected to perform on the training and work floor during the vocational training they are preparing for. In some cases, the link between a pedagogical task and a 'real life' task is direct and straightforward (e.g. Tasks 1, 2 and 4). Both the situation and the language students are required to reflect on an authentic situation. In the case of Tasks 3 and 5, the relevance and authenticity of the task primarily lies on the level of the cognitive and linguistic operations to be performed. In real life students might not be required to relate a map of a building to one out of three explanations, but the under-lying skill – relating an explanation to a graphic representation – is highly relevant. Likewise, ordering the situations in Task 5 is not relevant or authentic as such. What we are aiming for in this task is to spark a discussion in which each learner formulates his/her opinion and tries to reach a consensus with his/her partner, and while doing so productively uses and recycles much of the language that is related to functioning on the training and work floor.

The observations revealed that for most students the tasks were rather difficult. The receptionist's explanation in Task 2 contains some quite implicit information and is ambiguous. The rationale behind these difficulties is twofold. First, in real life outside the classroom, this type of language is the order of the day. In addition, this type of input yields a task that engenders a lot more interaction than more straightforward, unambiguous tasks leading to one correct answer. In the task at hand, the emphasis is on the interactional

process that leads to a solution acceptable for both learners, rather than on the mere correctness of the solution.

Even though we were trying to place emphasis on the interactional process rather than on the product (Task 3 is a clear example), we noticed that students did expect the computer to state whether their answer was correct or incorrect. For instance, Task 5 left them with a slight feeling of dissatisfaction. Initially, we wanted to incorporate feedback that would simulate the type of procedural feedback a mediating teacher would provide (cf. Chapters 8 and 9 in this volume). However, we soon realized the enormous problems associated with programming mediating processes. The computer's limitations with regard to the interpretation of learners' input made it impossible to provide feedback that was sufficiently fine-tuned. It was impossible to judge from a learner's input (e.g. clicking the wrong plan) what his exact problem was. So, eventually, we decided only to include feedback of a general nature, mostly referring the learners to the place where the relevant information could be found on the screen. The mediating function of computer feedback was more or less extracted from the software, and was left with the teacher and fellow students. The computer mainly provided 'the world to be explored'.

A very clear advantage of the computer-based material for the performance of Task 2 is the fact that different units of information (e.g. the map, the description of the route) can be offered at the same time as a coherent whole. In addition, the illustrative way in which the information is presented by the computer simplifies stepping into the world of the task. In a traditional classroom, the students are faced with the task of creating mental images of scenes or objects described by the teacher or in a text. Obviously, this places an extra burden on the learners who are already struggling with basic language comprehension. Using multimedia tools, the teacher no longer has to take pains to make students imagine they are at a receptionist's desk with a floor plan in their hands, or that the building is on fire. These situations are visible on the screen. Thus, a meaningful context is created in which language learning can be embedded.

At the linguistic level, students could use a (monolingual Dutch) dictionary that offered explanations, contexts and sometimes pictures of particular words in the tasks. In this way, we tried to accommodate to different learning styles. Students could decide for themselves whether they wanted to use these resources or not. In addition, students were allowed to work on a task for as long as they thought necessary, using the options for relistening to sound-files or calling up written versions (Task 3) as they saw fit.

In retrospect, one of the main conclusions of this pilot study was that we could (and should) have given the learners an even greater amount of control over their own learning process. Due to technical and financial limitations, the materials were still constructed in a rather linear way. Users cannot move about freely from task to task. Once a task is entered, it has to be completed. Some tasks are exploratory, but this feature could have been more prominent. Escaping the 'question and answer' routine is easier in theory than it is in practice, especially since a computer program is basically driven by stimulus-response. Nevertheless, upon completing the activities, we felt that we had succeeded in implementing at least some of the features we imagined a task-based program should have. The next step was to assess whether these features indeed resulted in valuable language learning experiences.

## 5  In practice: tasks put to the test

> The screen displays a floor plan of the company in which Victor Pica is employed. Victor has to meet the personnel manager. The company's receptionist explains how to get to his office. On the basis of this explanation, the learner has to click the correct spot on the map.
>
> Ben and Mohammed, two adult learners of Dutch as a second language, are working together at the computer. They listen to the receptionist's explanation, tracing the route she describes with their fingers on the screen. They negotiate about the answer and click on the screen. When the answer turns out to be wrong, there is some excitement. The teacher suggests they listen again to the explanation. After re-listening, Mohammed is convinced that this time he knows the right answer. Ben does not agree with his suggestion, but in the end, after an extensive discussion, he gives in. Mohammed clicks on the plan again ... wrong! Ben laughs triumphantly when his suggestion appears to be correct. The teacher who has observed the events from a distance asks why the first option was not correct.

This short incident sketches the classroom atmosphere during the experiment. The students were working autonomously in pairs or trios. The teacher intervened if the students needed support. During the experiment, two researchers were present, observing both the students and the teacher. At the end of the series of lessons, the teacher was interviewed in depth.

## 5.1  Features of the learning process

Data analysis revealed that the extent to which the learners interacted with each other while performing the tasks on the computer screen depended on a range of variables. The learners' personalities played a role, but the decisive factor appeared to be the design of the task. Complex 'problem solving' tasks caused a lot more interaction compared to simple tasks, in which, for instance, only the matching of a text with a drawing was required. Also, when task content appealed to students' own experiences, this often provoked a lot of discussion and interaction. Van den Branden & Van Gorp (2000) reached the same conclusions in a study of interaction in cooperative tasks in primary education (cf. Chapter 3 in this volume).

In the example described above, there was a lot of interaction. It is interesting to see that Mohammed, who is a rather dominating character, has to give in eventually. Ben, who, according to the teacher, is not that assertive, is left with a positive feeling, due to the confirmation of 'his' answer by the computer. In the interviews, teachers often claimed that students who hardly got involved in traditional classroom activities, were much more eager to participate actively in the computer activities. Apparently, the computer gave them a feeling of competence. Teachers often remarked that this feeling of competence was also transferred to non-computer activities. After the computer lessons, several students appeared to be more confident and active learners.

In the excerpt, Ben and Mohammed repeatedly listened to the directions given by the receptionist. In general, students made extensive use of the possibilities to look up words or to replay audio fragments. Once the functionality of the icons was clear, they were often used. In this respect, different learning styles became apparent. Some students started to look up every possible word in a document before they attempted to tackle the task. Others only looked up a word if it was absolutely necessary to get through the task.

While Ben and Mohammed were performing the task, they were continuously pointing out particular elements on the screen. This is a striking feature of the way they dealt with the task. In this way, they made relevant links between the information units more explicit. This strategy was typically used to explain things to fellow students or to clarify questions or problems to the teacher. Notably, students with relatively poor productive language skills were able to participate actively using the computer screen to 'make their point'. In this way, the less proficient students were also very involved with the task.

Here, we touch upon the true value of a multimedia teaching aid. With almost every student, the observations revealed a high degree of involvement. The way in which the students set their minds to the tasks, even ignoring the signal for the coffee break, was striking. Involvement should not be confused with superficial motivation originating from the novelty of the computer-aided learning experience. Students were involved with the tasks because the task content related to their needs and interests, and because the computer allowed them to take control over their own learning process.

## 5.2  The teacher

By putting the learners in charge of their own learning processes, a number of questions regarding the role of the teacher arose. Traditionally, the teacher functions as the main source of lesson content. The 'what', 'when' and 'how' of lesson content are part of the decisions made by teachers, based on their assumptions on relevant goals and methodology, and supported by the teaching aids at hand.

In task-based language education, the teacher's role shifts to that of a facilitator and mediator of students' learning processes, treating the student as someone actively constructing knowledge instead of passively receiving it (see Chapters 8 and 9 in this volume). This shift requires a profound change in teachers' attitudes. In practice, this change is hard to bring about (see Chapter 10 in this volume). However, by introducing the computer in the language classroom, it becomes easier for teachers to concentrate on their facilitating and mediating role, since offering content and organizing the lesson is to a large extent taken over by the computer. Teachers automatically take a step back and allow their students to explore different solutions for a given problem themselves. In this example, the teacher allows Ben and Mohammed to make mistakes in the process of trying out a number of hypotheses. Only when they finally discover the correct solution, does the teacher intervene to 'deepen' their learning experience.

Not only is the teacher's intervention postponed in comparison to a 'traditional' classroom situation, the way in which the intervention takes place is also different. Whereas teachers were used to solving comprehension problems by explicitly drawing on linguistic knowledge, they now tended to make extensive use of the (visual) context and tried to elicit hypothesis building and hypothesis testing processes from the students. The fact that students' cognitive and associative processes are visualized through their actions on the

computer screen, provides teachers with additional clues while evaluating and solving students' problems.

## 5.3  Possibilities for differentiation

In the groups we observed, differences in learning style and/or learning pace manifested themselves strongly. In practice, these differences turned out to be rather easily accommodated by the multimedia material.

Students were grouped at random, and this often resulted in pairs of students with differing levels of language proficiency working together. The combination of a more proficient student working together with a less proficient student was most successful if the latter was in charge of the computer's navigation controls. This actually forced the more proficient student to ensure that his partner grasped every important aspect of the task, and thus resulted in a lot of interaction prior to the input of an answer.

Some of these heterogeneous groups were more successful than others. In a few cases, students' personalities clashed or one student in a pair dominated the whole process. The latter often coincided with extreme differences in social status between students. Some students were unwilling to work in mixed-gender pairs. In any case, differences in language proficiency as such never inhibited students in successfully working together in heterogeneous pairs. The only exception we found was with two students who were actually misplaced in the general technical Dutch group i.e. who had not acquired a basic proficiency in Dutch.

After dealing with the computer tasks, every student in the classroom had received essentially the same linguistic input and coped with the same tasks. Differentiation takes place not so much on the content level, but on the support level i.e. through mediation by fellow students or teacher. As stated earlier, the flexibility of the material allowed students to work according to their own preferences. Some students really dug into the nitty-gritty of every task, looking up every possible word and discussing every aspect of the task with their partner. Other students went more directly for the completion of the task, ignoring less important aspects.

The fact that different groups of learners were working on different tasks at the same time posed no real problem for the teachers. The latter adapted remarkably well to their new function in the learning process.

# 6 Conclusions

In spite of the markedly positive tone of this story, a number of questions and problems still remain. First and foremost, the small-scale exploratory study we reported does not allow us to draw any firm conclusions with regard to the tasks' long-term language learning effects. There are strong indications that a number of learning conditions are positively influenced by the use of interactive multimedia, but due to the restricted scale of the research and the shortage of more extensive syllabuses, we cannot make any stronger assertions.

The strength of this type of multimedia activities appears to lie in the fact that a rich and dynamic learning environment can be created. This learning environment offers students a large amount of control and many leads and clues for profound language learning. The limitations of our multimedia materials (and of most currently available CALL materials for that matter) lie in the interpretation of the learner's input and the provision of suitable feedback. If the computer does not succeed in interpreting the solutions proposed by the students, this might limit its potential for application in task-based language teaching.

To further illustrate this, we will describe one more example taken from our observations. At a certain point, students have to find out who is responsible for the safety in the company by reading a letter on screen. The letter literally says:

Met vragen over de veiligheid in het bedrijf kan je terecht bij de heer Schoenmakers.
(Questions about the safety in the company can be put to Mr Schoenmakers).

The correct answer to the question is 'de heer Schoenmakers' (Mr Schoenmakers). Students are required to type this answer. A number of alternatives are also accepted (Schoenmakers, mijnheer Schoen-makers, schoenmakers ...). Two students we observed were engaged in a discussion over the correct answer. Their discussion finally resulted in the response: 'it has to be Schoenmakers because the "schoonmakers" (i.e. the Dutch word for "cleaners") know every-thing that goes on in the company'. Obviously, these students succeeded in giving an answer that, to the computer at least, is correct, although they had not succeeded in comprehending the information in the letter, which is the main purpose of the task. So, the feedback follow- ing this answer was totally beside the point.

Similar incidents make clear that a supportive and mediating

teacher remains indispensable when it comes to providing specific, targeted feedback that supports language learning. In addition, in spite of the interaction between students, most computer tasks remain rather reception based. Again, the inherent limitations of the computer when it comes to interpreting input are responsible for this. Indicating and specifying problems, as well as engaging in real-life conversations, are interactive processes. It requires very refined skills to interpret the utterances and actions of communicative partners. Currently, the computer is still far from delivering this level of refinement.

In sum, completely autonomous learning remains hard to achieve, and maybe that is not such a bad thing. Using a language and learning to do so, after all, remains a matter of interaction and communication between people. The computer can only enrich this process and provide rich content. The conclusion of our observations is that second language learners do benefit from the use of multi-media tasks, provided their development is based on sound didactic principles, is attuned to the learners' language learning needs and displays a level of creativity surpassing simple 'drill and practice'. In addition, the use of multimedia tools should be embedded in a classroom context that allows for interaction among learners and between learners and their teacher.

# 7    *Developing and introducing task-based language tests*

Marleen Colpin and Sara Gysen

Assessment occupies a prominent place in education. In a broad sense, the term 'assessment' may refer to virtually any action that is taken in order to assess learners' progress and their current skills, knowledge and attitudes. Assessment may, among other things, include observations, think-aloud protocols, self-assessment, peer assessment, portfolio assessment (all commonly covered by the term 'alternative testing') (Brown & Hudson, 1998; Bultynck, 2004; Genesee & Upshur, 1996; Van Petegem & Vanhoof, 2002) and the use of more 'classical' tests. This chapter focuses on the latter: tests that aim to measure to what extent a language learner can perform certain language tasks at a particular moment in time. The limited focus of this chapter is warranted by the fact that tests still constitute the bulk of most teachers' assessment practices around the world. Nevertheless, most of the ideas and principles we will advocate in this article can also be applied to assessment in the broader sense.

In an educational setting, tests are tightly linked to learning goals on the one hand, and the educational programme on the other (see also Chapter 1 in this volume). The relations between goals, tests and the educational programme are multidirectional. On the one hand, goals constitute the crucial point of departure for both education (curriculum design, choice of methodology, etc.) and testing. Conversely, test results may be highly informative on the quality of the education that was provided to the students and, by providing insight into the progress learners make, they may also offer relevant information on the attainability of the learning goals.

The crucial interplay between goals, methodology and testing becomes even more apparent in times of change. For example, when attainment goals are rewritten, this will typically enhance the need for new test development and the redesign of educational programmes. The paradigm shift that has pervaded the field of language education during the previous decades, involving a greater emphasis on communication and functional language use (Legutke & Thomas, 1991), reverberates in the field of language testing. Language tests in

which the knowledge of discrete elements or grammar rules is tested and in which language use is elicited in an artificial void increasingly have to make way for tests in which functional language use, including its sociolinguistic and pragmatic aspects, as well as the context in which it takes place, are taken into consideration (Long & Norris, 2000; Morrow, 1979).

In general, assessment tasks serve as tools to elicit the language abilities and strategies that are believed to underlie successful language performance. These abilities and strategies form the construct of what is tested (Bachman, 1990; Bachman & Palmer, 1996; see also Chapter 2 in this volume). For many construct-centred tests, for instance those focusing on subskills (vocabulary, grammar) or those measuring domain-independent, general language proficiency, it is hard to assess the extent to which test results allow for an accurate prediction of the test taker's ability to successfully perform language tasks in real life. To a large extent, this has to do with the fact that the dynamic interaction between cognitive, contextual and linguistic variables that govern language performance in real life (O' Sullivan, 2000; Skehan, 1998; Weir, 2004) is often not sufficiently taken into account in system-referenced, 'analytic' tests (Widdowson, 2001); neither is the integrated use of different skills and competencies that come naturally with real language use, nor the various ways a language learner can compensate for certain limited skills by using another skill or competence.

In this line of reasoning, predictions of future language performance will be more accurate if they are based on testing and assessment procedures that take these dynamic relations into account and, consequently, allow for more direct inferences about the learner's ability to use language in real life (Cucchiarini & Jaspaert, 1996; Douglas, 2000; McNamara, 1996). Task-based assessment (Brown *et al.*, 2002; Long & Norris, 2000; Norris, 2002; Norris *et al.*, 1998) can be defined as an approach that attempts to assess as directly as possible whether test takers are able to perform specific target language tasks in particular communicative settings. Task-based assessment does not merely utilize the real-world tasks as a means for eliciting the production of particular components of the language system, which are then measured or evaluated. Instead, the construct of interest in task-based assessment is the performance of the task itself.

If language tasks are defined as being real-life activities that require meaningful language for their performance (see Chapter 1 for a definition of 'task'), assessment tasks ideally should be motivating and authentic tasks that relate to what learners are expected to be

able to do with the target language (in real life). In terms of assessment, a task-based approach relates the performance of the test taker to the criterion performance of successful task performance (Long & Crookes, 1992). One major challenge task-based assessment faces has to do with the extent to which the successful performance of a particular language task can be generalized to the performance of other language tasks. According to Norris (2002), it remains unclear to what extent task-based language assessment provides a basis for making interpretations beyond the particular task or test context. In addition, task-based language assessment has the danger of eliciting performances that depend on abilities or knowledge unrelated to language *per se*, nor can it hope to simulate all of the factors that define actual language use in communicative situations. Nevertheless, according to Norris (2002: 396):

> for a variety of purposes in a number of education contexts, and especially for classroom internal use by teachers, it has also been argued that complex, integrative, open-ended task-specific tests are necessary for meeting actual inferential demands (e.g. relevant interpretations about what learners know and can do) and for achieving the intended outcomes of assessment (e.g. fostering students' abilities to do things with the knowledge they have acquired beyond the simple display of knowledge on tests).

The main aim of this article is to illustrate how task-based tests can be developed so as to obtain reliable and valid information about learners, teaching methods and educational goals, and to show how some of the above-mentioned challenges can be dealt with. To illustrate our ideas, we will use several examples of task-based tests that were developed at the Centre for Language and Education (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven), and that were used to assess learners' language proficiency of Dutch as a first or second language (in many of these programmes, such as courses of 'Dutch' in secondary education, native speakers and non-native speakers of Dutch participated together). Most of these tests were introduced in Flemish schools under close guidance of the Centre itself or with the support of school counsellors with whom the Centre cooperated. This allows us to also discuss in the second half of this chapter the kind of reactions that the introduction of task-based tests evoke among teachers. After all, task-based tests were 'new' to many of the teachers involved: in more than one way, they deviated from the kind of tests typically included in available teaching methods or from the tests traditionally developed by teachers themselves, especially

those who had been working in a more 'linguistic', forms-focused tradition.

Clearly, the ideas raised in this article are not strictly linked to the task-based teaching approach: task-based tests, aiming to measure language proficiency in a direct way, are relevant for any type of language course, whether the pedagogical approach adopted is task-based or not.

# 1  A few early examples

The first example we will describe is the TAL (Taalvaardigheidstoets Aanvang Lager Onderwijs), one of the earliest attempts of the Centre for Language and Education to develop assessment tools along more task-based lines. The TAL is a language proficiency test administered to 6-year-old children who have finished kindergarten and who are at the point of entering primary education (Werkgroep Taaltoetsen, 1995). The aim of the test is to provide the primary school teacher of the first year with valuable information about their new pupils' Dutch language proficiency. The test works with cut scores that indicate whether pupils' level of Dutch language proficiency is sufficiently high to be able to follow education in the first year of school without any problems. Pupils who do not reach the cut score need extra support to develop further their Dutch language proficiency. The guidelines to the test strongly emphasize that the test is not meant to function as a gatekeeper or as a punishment for the children, but rather that it should alert teachers that some pupils' Dutch language proficiency needs extra care and stimulation. In other words, test results invite the school to adapt to the child, rather than vice versa.

Even though the TAL test moves away from the purely meta-linguistic tests that were being used by teachers before its introduction, it is not a genuinely task-based test. In the first place, it is a vocabulary test in which the words that are tested are inserted in linguistic contexts that resemble the kind of functional tasks that pupils of the first grade of primary school will be asked to perform, such as comprehending short instructions and stories. The TAL was devised on the basis of a corpus study of language use in the first year of primary school (Cucchiarini & Jaspaert, 1995; Schrooten, 1997; see also Chapter 4 in this volume). The corpus study focused on the teachers' oral input and the written input in handbooks. From this corpus, a list of 1,400 words that scored high in terms of frequency and spread was selected. Subsequently, 150 words were selected from the list. These words were inserted in linguistic contexts that are relevant to pupils of the first year. These contexts were converted to

descriptions, instructions and stories accompanying pictures, which are read aloud to the test takers. To show that they have comprehended the oral messages, the pupils have to mark particular items in the picture. The TAL consists of 50 listening comprehension items. In Example 1, two of these items are included.

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**Forgotten**

You will now hear a short story. The story begins here (the test administrator points at the drawing to the left). Put your finger there. Watch the page closely.

*It's raining. Jan does not mind because he has an umbrella. Then the sun appears again. Jan is going to rest a little. Then he walks on, but he forgets his umbrella. Put a cross on the drawing in which Jan forgets his umbrella.*
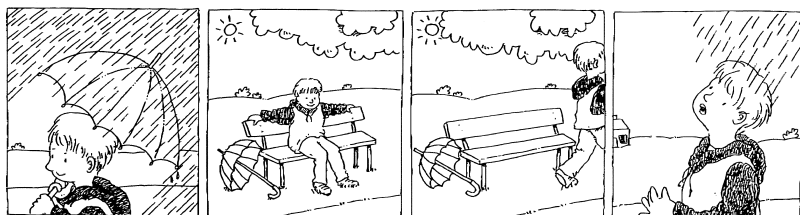


**Again**

*This girl is writing a letter. She has smudged it. She starts all over again. Put a cross on the drawing in which she starts all over again.*



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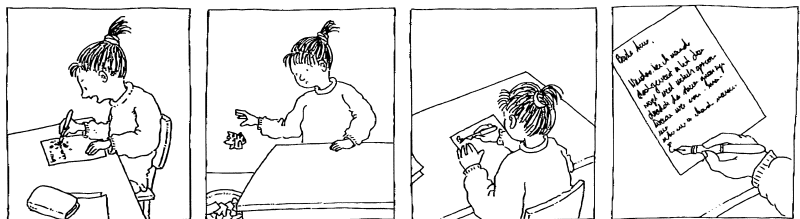
**Example 1**    Two items taken from the TAL test, a test of Dutch language proficiency for young children

The choice for a receptive, listening comprehension test was deliberate. Pupils entering primary school have very limited, if no, reading and writing skills (they learn to read and write in the first year of primary school). Listening comprehension was deemed more important than speaking ability, since understanding the teacher's oral instructions, feedback and informative monologues is a key ability determining whether pupils will be able to develop the basic

skills that constitute the heart of the first year programme. Since the words and the contexts were selected from the first year corpus, the test claims to test directly whether pupils are 'ready' to do the kinds of things with language they are supposed to do from the very first days in the first year of school onwards. A predictive validity study empirically corroborated this claim (Cucchiarini & Jaspaert, 1995). In this study, 203 pupils who had been administered the TAL were followed during the next school year. Their score on the TAL was found to correlate significantly with their educational success at the end of the year. This study was used, along with other criteria, to establish three ranges of scores, predicting the chance that the pupil will potentially face difficulties in the first year of primary school. With regard to pupils scoring low on the TAL, the primary school teacher's ambition should be to falsify the prediction made by the test by skilfully catering to the pupils' language learning needs.

A second early example comes from adult education. It concerns the TOBA (Toets Basistaalvaardigheid Anderstalige Volwassenen; Werkgroep volwassenenonderwijs, 2000), a test aiming to assess whether adult non-native speakers (NNSs) have reached a basic level of Dutch second language proficiency. This test was based on a description of attainment goals for Dutch second language proficiency at the basic level. The Flemish official Service for Employment Exchange (VDAB), responsible for the training of the unemployed, uses this test to assess whether non-native candidates possess the minimal Dutch language skills required to enter their Dutch as a second language programme preparing for vocational training. If candidates fail the test, they should follow a basic Dutch language course first.

The development of TOBA was based on a needs analysis of the language use situations in which adult learners of Dutch should be able to function using basic Dutch (for more details, see Chapter 2). The language use situations were described in terms of the typical language tasks ('type tasks') learners have to perform. This set of 'type tasks', derived from the needs analysis, formed the basis for formulating the attainment goals for the 'basic level of Dutch' in Flanders. In addition, the list of 'type tasks' served as the basis for the development of the TOBA: a sample was taken and turned into assessment tasks. In doing so, this test illustrates the kind of compromises task-based test developers often have to make (see Example 2).

Testing speaking proficiency is time consuming, if only because of the need for individual administration. Scoring spoken output is a costly matter too and requires extensive rater training. Since the economy of the test was of great importance for the intended test

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**Bureau for Social Welfare**

Situation: The candidate orally applies for financial help at the Bureau.

Tasks:  Understanding oral questions about personal circumstances, reacting to these questions orally

The test takers have to imagine that they have to go to the Bureau for Social Welfare in order to ask for money. The person behind the desk asks a number of questions. The test takers have to show they understand the questions well, and have to indicate they know the appropriate answer to these questions by ticking the correct option.

*How much money do you have each month to pay all your bills?*
- ☐ The amount of this bill is 5,000 Belgian Francs.
- ☐ I paid 75,000 Belgian Francs.
- ☐ The bills together amount to 12,000 Belgian Francs.
- ☐ I have 30,000 Belgian Francs a month.
- ☐ Every month I receive five bills.

*Can you tell me how much money you spend each month?*
- ☐ I don't want to spend all my money.
- ☐ I spend 35,000 Belgian Francs each month.
- ☐ I paid the doctor 1,050 Belgian Francs this month.
- ☐ I always spend that much money.
- ☐ This month I won't pay anything.

*Can you explain what you spend your money on?*
- ☐ I like spending money.
- ☐ My mother puts her money in the bank.
- ☐ I don't pay school bills.
- ☐ That gentleman pays his bills.
- ☐ For instance I have to pay the bills for the house.

*How much money a month do you spend on food?*
- ☐ I spend 4,000 Belgian Francs a month on food.
- ☐ I don't eat.
- ☐ I pay 3,000 Belgian Francs a month to pay gasoline for my car.
- ☐ I only eat healthy things.
- ☐ I don't drink anymore.

---

**Example 2**  Items taken from the TOBA test, a language proficiency test for adult second language learners of Dutch

administrators, a natural tension arose between content validity and practicability. After careful consideration, the choice was made to convert a language use situation at the Bureau for Social Welfare, normally involving face-to-face interaction between individuals, to a task that could be administered in lockstep classroom conditions. The test developers tried to retain as much of the authentic context as

possible. This naturally leads us from the question of the content of tests (what should be included?) to the kind of formats that are used in the test (how?). We discuss these questions in the next section.

## 2  Situation or simulation?

The examples in the previous section illustrated a number of obstacles test developers meet when trying to translate target tasks into test tasks. These obstacles are, in general, the result of the test developers' aim to reconcile their striving for direct test performance on attainment goals with the unavoidably artificial nature of classroom testing. If one wants to find out whether the test taker is able to produce an oral application at a Bureau for Social Welfare, the most straightforward way to test this is to ask him to do so. If one wants to find out whether, or to what extent, children entering primary school are able to understand the language they will hear from their teachers when they start their first year in school, it seems logical to present these pupils with this kind of input and measure the extent to which they can comprehend it. Cucchiarini & Jaspaert (1995) have called this 'direct testing', but other terms have been used in this respect (e.g. Bachman's 'real-life approach', Norris's 'task-based language performance assessment'). The focus of the test is on performance, and there is supposed to be a direct link between test performance and target performance (Brown *et al*., 2002; Norris, 2000; Norris *et al*., 1998; Skehan, 1998). Indirect testing, on the other hand, focuses on underlying competences. This might be the case when, for instance, vocabulary tests are used to assess reading comprehension, or the comprehension of particular isolated words is taken as an indication of the test taker's ability to comprehend texts. Skehan (1998: 156) defines indirect tests as 'the more typical of language proficiency testers', but claims that:

> The contrasting real-life approach achieves much greater success in predicting performance in the real world. Since it aims only to predict performance in restricted situations, the test formats that it uses can simply simulate the desired situations fairly accurately, using realistic performance conditions as well as contextually-based material which is close to what will be encountered in the real world (Bachman, 1990). In general, this approach has emphasized [content] validity.

The content validity of direct tests is greater than that of indirect tests where it is so important to give substance to the supposed relation-

ship between the tested language competence and the target performance. In other words, opting for direct tests might pay off more in terms of predicting target language performance in real life, yet the extent to which generalizations can be made on the basis of task-based assessment performance should not be overestimated or idealized either. According to Skehan (1998: 156):

> The difficulty, of course, is that success is bought at quite a high price – the limited generalization that is possible beyond the set of performance or contextual conditions which the test is targeted at. If performance conditions vary, or if there are differences in contextual factors, it is very difficult to know if they are of minor importance or great significance.

Skehan argues for meticulously describing contextual conditions and for conducting research on how these contextual conditions influence target language performance. The local or accidental effect of certain task features and contextual conditions can be reduced to a considerable degree, hence adding to the validity of test administration, by building in sufficient quantity and variation in the battery of test tasks, and by carefully sampling relevant tasks from the domain involved (Norris, 2000). It must be clear, then, that terms like 'direct' and 'indirect' should not be seen as dichotomous, but rather as extremes on a continuum. Tests will be situated somewhere along this continuum, depending on the selected tasks and the test's intended use. A vocabulary test may be an indirect test of reading comprehension skills, but may also be used as a direct test of particular vocabulary skills.

Task-based test developers aim to devise tests that provide direct information on test takers' target language performance in specific language use situations, but they will never reach a stage of perfection. In fact, tests can, at best, be semi-direct. The task included in the test cannot be but a simulation of the reality the test developer has in mind. As Van Gelderen (1992: 6–7) emphasizes, the test takers will always have to use their imagination to some extent:

> In an integrated task, a situation is imitated in which a certain skill usually in conjunction with other skills has to be used to reach a personal and relevant goal. Integrated tasks are constructed in such a way that they simulate a realistic communicative situation, which pupils can recognize as such ... The goals of these tasks is not for the pupil to actually believe that he finds himself in a situation that has real consequences for him. The pupil is rather called upon to interpret the situation as a kind of game. (Our translation)

How far this can be stretched depends on the test-taker population and the skill that is assessed. Productive skills, especially speaking, usually ask for more empathy, goodwill and imagination from the test taker than listening or reading tasks.

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**Speaking test for the fourth year (primary education): The evening after sports day**

The pupils are confronted with three speaking tasks:

1 When you go home after school, you see a girl falling from a slide in the playground (+ drawing); you ring the bell at one of the nearby houses and ask for help.
2 Back at home, you give an account of what sports day was like (note: in the test, sports day is visualized by means of drawings).
3 Later on, you phone a friend to invite him to your birthday party.

For the third task, the pupils receive the following oral instructions:

*When is your birthday?* (the pupil answers the question) *You are now going to pretend that it is . . .* (name the date), *and you are going to have a birthday party. You have already invited a number of friends to come to your party. But there is still another friend that you would like to invite. You can choose whom.* (The pupil says a name) *You will now call X* (name) *on the phone to ask him/her whether he/she can come. You will tell him/her everything he/she needs to know to come to your party. So you will have to mention when and where the party will be, what time it begins and ends, if the children need to bring something e.g. a present . . . I will play X. I will first give you some time to plan in advance, so that you can prepare what you are going to say.*

The test administrator completes the following table while the pupil is talking:

| Task 3: Birthday Party | | |
|---|---|---|
| | content | form |
| 1  Why? (you want to invite him/her to your birthday party) | | |
| 2  Where? (the party takes place (at home, in the swimming pool, . . .) | | |
| 3  When? (the party takes place) | | |
| 4  Beginning/end (what time the party begins and ends) | | |
| 5  Bring along something? (if yes, what?) | | |

**Example 3**    Test task taken from a speaking-test in VLOT, a battery of task-based language tests for Flemish primary education

The quote on page 19 strongly applies to the example above (Example 3), taken from VLOT, a battery of task-based Dutch language proficiency tests for primary education. The test in the example is meant for children in their fourth year of primary school (10-year-olds).

The three tasks in Example 3 show great variation with regard to different features of the communicative situation, such as the speaker, the listener, the relationship between the interlocutors, the topic and contextual conditions. The test taker will have to adapt to each of these situations. Yet, in each case, the teacher/test administrator plays the role of the listener or interlocutor. Evidently, this is unnatural, and pupils appear to be highly aware of this (cf. personal communication with test administrators). Even more problematic is the fact that the administrator also gives the instructions for the task: the pupils can hardly imagine him as an ignorant interlocutor. A possible solution to this problem is not to score the most evident shared information and to allow the pupil enough time to get immersed in the situation. For instance, in the third assessment task in Example 3, it would not be fair to score whether the pupils make themselves known on the phone. Their interlocutor (the teacher) knows who is at the other end of the telephone line.

One way to (partially) overcome the problem of simulation, and thus reduce the influence of the test taker's imaginative skills, is to design task-based multimedia tests. The TIBO (Taaltoets Instroom Beroepsopleiding, Depauw & Schrooten, 2000), also developed at the Centre for Language and Education, illustrates this. This test is part of an intake procedure of VDAB, establishing whether adult NNSs of Dutch possess the language proficiency that is minimally required to enter vocational training for the unemployed in the industrial sector. Item selection was based on needs analysis, conducted through observations on the training floor and interviews with vocational trainers, second language teachers and professional counsellors (Van den Branden *et al.*, 2002). Multimedia tests have a number of advantages over pen-and-paper tests. First, the context in which the test taker has to perform the target tasks can be introduced as if true to life, using a combination of sound and video. This allows the test taker to really enter into the world that is relevant for his purposes. Secondly, the context is introduced and the instructions are given in a perfectly uniform way. Thirdly, responses may be automatically corrected by the computer, adding to the reliability of the rating procedure. Many multimedia applications in the field of language testing eagerly exploit the second and the third advantage (creating uniform instructions, and automatic correction), but the first, which

pertains to the simulation problem, much less (Depauw, 2000; see also Chapter 6 in this volume). Many computer tests are merely copies of traditional pen-and-paper tests, focusing on linguistic sub-skills rather than integrating meaningful language use into real-life situations.

One potential disadvantage of computer tests is that they favour test takers with computer experience. To avoid this, the interface of TIBO was kept as simple as possible, and test takers with no computer experience were given a short training before taking the test. Analyses of TIBO pretesting showed that computer experience did not significantly affect test results (Van den Branden *et al*., 2002).

## 3  Enhancing reliability

In order to obtain reliable data from test administration (i.e. obtaining data that really reflect the test takers' relevant skills, minimizing the potential effect of all kinds of coincidental and contextual factors such as the time and place of test administration, the test takers' mood, etc.), Hughes (1989: 36–42) distinguishes a wide array of techniques the test developer can apply. First, there are a number of techniques focusing on the test taker's performance:

> take enough samples of behaviour; do not allow candidates too much freedom; write unambiguous items; provide clear and explicit instructions; ensure that tests are well laid out and perfectly legible; candidates should be familiar with format and testing techniques; provide uniform and non-distracting conditions of administration.

Next, there are techniques that focus on the reliability of the rater(s):

> use items that permit scoring which is as objective as possible; make comparisons between candidates as direct as possible; provide a detailed scoring key; train scorers; agree acceptable responses and appropriate scores at outset of scoring.

In this paragraph, a number of these techniques will be illustrated using some of the task-based tests that were developed at the Centre for Language and Education. The conditions Hughes distinguishes may be experienced as restrictive or as conflicting with test validity. As Hughes (1989: 42) puts it: 'There will always be some tension between reliability and validity. The tester has to balance gains in one against losses in the other.'

The first example we will give deals with candidates' familiarity

with the format, and with providing clear and explicit instructions. Example 4 is part of KOBI-TV, an observation tool for 4-year-old infants (Kleuterobservatie-instrument Taalvaardigheid; Gysen *et al.*, 1999). The instrument is not a classical test, but a collection of 27 tasks that together constitute an implicational scale of ascending difficulty. The tasks all represent real language use situations at school in which the infant has to comprehend Dutch or produce Dutch in order to perform a task. The tasks are based on the attainment goals for Dutch in Flemish infant schools. The administration of the instrument can be integrated in any ordinary school day and demands little of the teacher in terms of practical organization, and little of the child in terms of specific test taking skills.

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**Building with blocks**

The infants have to show they understand simple instructions by performing a number of actions with blocks.

1  Take a blue and a yellow block, and put them next to each other.
2  Take three green blocks. Put the blocks in a row.

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**Example 4**  Task taken from KOBI-TV, a task-based test for Dutch-medium kindergarten children

The naturalness of the situations in the tasks strongly contributes to the test takers' familiarity with the test formats. The test takers have already performed this task numerous times. No extra knowledge of the world or skills are required. The infants know how to handle blocks. If, on the other hand, they would have been asked to thread beads on a string in a certain pattern or order, and the infants had never done this before, a lack of motor skills or experience with this particular task could seriously hinder their task performance, so it would be hard to establish clearly the extent to which the infants had understood the linguistic message. Likewise, unfamiliar elements in drawings, which are very often used in tests for young children or candidates with few qualifications, can cause the same problem.

Similarly, the instructions to the tasks should not pose any comprehension problems to the test takers. Instructions require listening and reading skills, but are not usually part of what is tested. Test administrators and developers have to take all necessary precautions to make sure the instructions can be easily understood.

As the oral instruction is embedded in an interaction between the test taker and the test administrator, the latter has ample chance to check whether the test taker fully understands what is expected from him. In the oral interaction accompanying Example 5, mention is

**Shopping**

The shopping task in the TOBA test assesses the extent to which the test taker is able to formulate personal desires and needs while shopping, and to what extent he is able to understand questions and very simple verbal messages about prices, numbers, measures and weights. In the shopping task, the test taker has to show that he understands typical messages that are conveyed in a shopping context by selecting one drawing (out of a number of alternatives) that matches the verbal message.

The administration of this test task is preceded by an introductory conversation between the test taker and the administrator. During this conversation, the test taker is first introduced to the shopping context. Next, the test taker and the administrator practise one example of a test item together. In this example, the test taker has to match a drawing with a verbal message typically conveyed in a shopping context, just to show that he understands the instructions, and will have no problems with the testing format.

**Example 5**    Introduction to a test task in TOBA, a language proficiency test for adult second language learners of Dutch

made of the context of shopping, just to make sure this is a familiar context for all test takers before they are confronted with the test task. If the instructions had been given in the form of a written text, this would have guaranteed the uniformity of the instructions which Hughes adds as an important condition – but then the test administrator would have less opportunity to check the test takers' comprehension of the instructions. In a test like TOBA, which measures very basic language skills, reading elaborate instructions would probably have been more difficult than the tasks in the test.

Instructions should also be unambiguous. The instructions in Example 3 above (*Birthday Party*) may seem quite limiting, as the test administrator explicitly indicates what the pupils should mention on the phone. Again, this was done to make sure the children knew what was expected of them. They are not left groping in the dark as to what they will be evaluated on, and this may boost their self-confidence and motivation to take the test.

Another technique to enhance reliability mentioned by Hughes, is to take enough samples of performance and to build in variation in terms of task types and the level of difficulty of test tasks. Variation may reduce the undesired impact of test takers not being familiar with certain test formats or topics. Variation between items in terms of difficulty level may provide more detailed insight into the test takers' actual level of performance. This implies that a task-based

test should contain a sufficient number of items. Example 2 illustrates this kind of variation.

Finally, the items should be mutually independent. In many tests, candidates are asked to place drawings or parts of a text in the correct order. This format has one clear disadvantage: one error inevitably implicates at least one other error, which may distort the overall rating or produce relatively great ranges of scores. This may be taken into account when developing (for instance, by also using many other test formats), when scoring or when administering the test. For instance, in a test in which the candidates are asked to draw a route on a map on the basis of oral instructions, the candidates may be (re)directed to the correct position once in a while. In this way, the effect of errors on further items is neutralized to some extent. In a test like the TAL (see Example 1), items and tasks coincide: with every new item, the child has a new chance to show how well his Dutch language proficiency has developed.

## 4  Objective scoring

Hughes also mentions a number of measures that can be taken to reduce the effect of subjectivity while scoring. On the whole, tests measuring receptive skills (reading and listening) allow this to a much greater extent than tests measuring productive skills (speaking and writing). Many teachers tend to score speaking and writing tasks in a global way, based on their intuitive 'feel'. They find it hard to break down their global rating to smaller components, and to rate each of these components separately. This is what has been done for the tests in the above-mentioned examples: the separate components of task 'criterion performance' (Long & Crookes, 1992) function as dichotomous items, each of which is scored as '0' or '1'. Together, the items constitute a checklist that is predetermined before test administration. The test taker is informed about the evaluation criteria before taking the test, for instance at the moment he receives the instructions. In this way, not only does the test taker have a clear view of what he will be evaluated on, but the enormous range of possible responses that may come out of a task-based productive test may be reduced to some extent too.

For instance, the checklist of the speaking task in Example 3 (*Birthday Party*) contains 11 items. The first five items deal with message content (are the essential components of the message conveyed?), the next five with form. The eleventh item covers speaking fluency: this item rates the ease with which the test taker expressed himself in Dutch while tackling the task. The balance

between form and function in the checklist depends on the nature of the task. For instance, for some writing tasks, such as e-mails to a peer or a short scribbled note to mum, getting across the message is more important than absolute spelling correctness. On the other hand, when students write an application letter or a letter to the mayor, formal requirements become more strict. In the first case, content predominates over form in the checklist, while in the second they are more equally balanced. This runs counter to many teachers' tendency to emphasize the importance of correct spelling for every writing task. During one of our inservice training courses on task-based testing, we confronted the participating teachers with a recording of a 10-year-old girl who was asked to call up her friend and invite her to her birthday party. Though the girl in the test rattled on in fluent and errorless sentences for five minutes, she failed to convey essential information such as when the party would take place and where it would be organized. Many teachers gave her extremely high marks on her performance. Yet, for this task, fluency may not be the primary criterion for evaluation: informing the interlocutor about the 'where' and 'when' of the birthday party and getting across the invitation are more essential, and therefore take a greater share in the checklist.

One obvious disadvantage of using analytic checklists is that for the test administrator it is quite hard to score performances online, especially when the administrator simultaneously has to play the role of interlocutor. For many of the tests in the examples above, we advise test administrators to record the candidates' output on audio-tape. While this may add to more objective and reliable scoring, it makes the test more time consuming. For this reason alone, tests focusing on speaking proficiency should be limited and should be replaced as much as possible by incidental or focused observation of students performing speaking tasks in the classroom or in real life.

## 5  Implications of task-based tests for language teachers

In this section, we will discuss a number of implications that the introduction of task-based performance tests may have for language teachers. We will base this section on the feedback that was provided to us, over the years, by Flemish school counsellors and teachers in the field and on a number of implementation studies conducted at the Centre for Language and Education. On the whole, for many teachers, the implementation of task-based tests is not an obvious matter. It may collide with long-standing traditions in education.

Tensions may arise out of the seeming incompatibility of task-based tests with teachers' current testing practices, with their teaching practices and with their views on language, language testing, language teaching and education in general. All this may apply not only to individual teachers, but equally to whole school teams or to school policies.

## 5.1 Meaning or form?

To many teachers, task-based tests are seemingly incompatible with a focus-on-forms-oriented, 'linguistic' language teaching methodology, which views language as consisting of different elements that have to be taught separately and explicitly by the teacher, and then practised and automatized by the pupil. Striving for uniformity between their teaching and testing practices, many Flemish teachers have, for the past decades, primarily been using language tests that measure orthographic skills, phonetic reading skills, knowledge of vocabulary and grammar skills, employing the same kind of exercises in their tests as the ones used to drill these subskills. To the teachers, tests like these are reasonably easy to develop. Moreover, they are omnipresent in the syllabuses and testing batteries that are sold by commercial publishers and that dominate the educational market (as a matter of fact, they probably still dominate the market *because* they are full of these kinds of exercises). Furthermore, school reports typically include the above-mentioned subskills, which makes many teachers cling to the idea that each of them *has* to be tested. These school reports are intended to provide clear information on students' linguistic progress to parents, who were educated the very same 'linguistic' way and who, therefore, expect the school to test the children on these subskills.

The introduction of task-based tests challenges this deeply in-grained system. It came as no surprise, then, that many of the above-mentioned task-based tests developed by the Centre for Language and Education were criticized and adapted by Flemish teachers because they were thought to undervalue correctness, or because grammar, lexical or technical reading skills were not explicitly tested. Timmermans (2005) conducted a study on the language teaching views and practices of Flemish teachers of the first year of primary school. In a standardized interview conducted at the end of the school year, she asked the teachers to intuitively rank their pupils according to their reading proficiency. Timmermans also administered technical reading tests and a task-based reading comprehension test from the pupils. In general, the teachers' intuitive assessments

matched the pupils' scores on the technical reading tests far better than the scores on the task-based reading comprehension tests. Some of the teachers found it quite hard to explain the differences between their own rankings and those resulting from the task-based reading comprehension test: 'How come? I find this very awkward. I don't really know how to interpret this' (teacher 19).

Quite typically, especially teachers who adopted a very 'linguistic' view of reading education, firmly believing that reading for comprehension automatically results from (and can only come about as a result of) technical reading skills, found it hard to see any added value in the use of task-based reading comprehension tests. For example, teacher 19 quoted above stated that: 'If they can't technically read it, they won't be able to understand it'.

Likewise, sales figures of Flemish commercial publishers show that testing batteries emphasizing spelling rather than task-based tests assessing functional writing proficiency are preferred by school teams. Flemish teachers' concern for spelling correctness not only has to do with their inclination to focus on linguistic elements rather than on functional language use, but is also strengthened by Flanders' sociolinguistic heritage: in view of the long struggle for official status and the slow standardization of Dutch in Flanders (as a result of age-old domination by French), compulsory education in Flanders from the 1960s onwards, was assigned a major role in raising Flemish children's mastery of 'correct' Dutch, as opposed to sloppy, vulgar, regional Flemish dialect (Deprez, 1999). As a result of Flemish teachers' high concern for correctness, task-based methods and test batteries that value communicative adequacy equally highly as formal correctness may actually be perceived as a threat to educational standards.

## 5.2 *The vagueness of task-based language learning*

Moreover, task-based tests may add to the feeling of uncertainty that all teachers inherently have to cope with: since, in language teaching, there is no strict relationship between what is taught and what is learnt, and teachers remain, to a large extent, ignorant of what goes on in learners' heads, they can only speculate on the effects of their daily labour and good intentions. It should come as no surprise, then, that many teachers very willingly embrace pedagogical approaches and assessment practices that spell out the 'steps of teaching' and equate these with the 'steps of learning'. Teachers like to be brick-layers, making themselves believe that by laying bricks, one by one, in a predictable and nicely prescribed order, they will build a

beautiful house inhabited by another. The elegance of form-focused tests, and 'linguistic' teaching for the same matter, is that they allow the teacher to feel like a skilled bricklayer, who is in full control of the construction process.

In a number of implementation studies of task-based teaching conducted by the Centre for Language and Education (Berben, 2002; Devlieger *et al.*, 2003; Luyten & Houben, 2002; Timmermans, 2005; see also Chapter 10 in this volume) teachers raised the concern that, once they start using task-based materials, they will lose sight of what their students have actually learnt from performing all these tasks. Sometimes, the old and trusted vocabulary and grammar tests are then used by teachers as the 'ultimate' test of the effectiveness of the task-based materials or as a kind of measurement that the teachers perceive to be more valid. The latter is exemplified in Berben's study into the implementation of the above-mentioned TOBA (the basic Dutch language proficiency test for NNS adults). Berben conducted structured interviews with Dutch second language teachers and coordinators of language teaching centres using the test. Many of her respondents criticized TOBA because speaking proficiency was not directly tested (see section 2, and Example 2 above) and the majority of the test items tested receptive skills (listening/reading). On the whole, second language teachers seem to find it hard to 'believe' the results of reception-based tests. Language output is often considered a far more reliable and valid indicator of learners' language proficiency. This is not surprising. First, in general assessment terms, 'output' is often interpreted as a synonym of 'effect'. Secondly, output is far more 'tangible' to teachers than the invisible mechanisms going on in learners' heads when they are trying to comprehend input. Thirdly, output lends itself neatly to an analysis of the lexicon, grammar and other subskills. One of the respondents in Berben's study (2002: 115) put it this way: 'I would like to supplement TOBA with more active tests: writing, spelling, speaking. I would have the students write a free text to see what their *real* language skills are' (our italics).

Another objection of the second language teachers to TOBA in Berben's study pertained to the alleged relationship between test takers' performance on a task-based test and their performance in real life. Quite strikingly, the TOBA-situation at the Bureau for Social Welfare (in Example 2) was found highly problematic by many teachers, especially by the teachers whose students had never been to such a bureau or were unlikely to ever go there in real life. To the teachers, this situation was found to seriously threaten the face validity of the test.

Berben's study, then, seems to suggest that a task-based test for assessing general language proficiency may actually be (perceived as) a *contradictio in terminis*. A task-based test should be adaptive in the sense that the language use situations that are selected should be finely tuned to the test takers' specific language learning needs. This would call for a collection of tasks from which the teacher can take relevant samples according to the test takers' needs profile, rather than for a single, uniform standardized test based on a sample of a wide range of language use situations that are alleged to be relevant to an extensive, heterogeneous population.

## 5.3  Who develops the task-based tests?

The last remark in the previous section raises the question to what extent teachers should be stimulated to develop or devise task-based tests themselves. One argument in favour of this is that this challenges teachers to carefully consider the attainment goals they want their students to reach. For teachers who tend to formulate attainment goals in terms of isolated words and grammar rules, in line with their 'linguistic' teaching practices, trying to formulate attainment goals in terms of tasks and developing corresponding task-based tests may lead to 'noticing a gap'. Furthermore, developing task-based tests may provide teachers with an active way of elaborating their professional proficiency with regard to testing.

However, the many inservice training courses the Centre for Language and Education has organized throughout the years with this aim in mind have shown that, for teachers, developing task-based tests is extremely difficult. Among the 'classic' problems that teachers run into are:

- finding or selecting proper source materials (e.g. authentic, motivating, relevant texts and tasks);
- avoiding test bias (cf. with regard to knowledge of the world, arithmetic skills, etc.);
- establishing the difficulty of the test;
- constructing independent items;
- devising objective and task-relevant checklists for scoring productive skills.

Moreover, many teachers have affective objections against developing tests themselves. If they are asked or required to do so, they may come to see the development of tests according to a 'new' paradigm primarily in terms of 'much work', 'much trouble' and 'much time'. Ellis (2003) therefore suggests that teachers should not devote their

precious time to developing materials, but instead should focus on the essence of their job: setting up the kind of interaction with their learners that stimulates language acquisition in the classroom. Rather than developing tasks or tests, they should use them.

For these good reasons, the Centre for Language and Education has widely invested in the development and publication of task-based tests that can be readily used by teachers. Many of these tests were norm-referenced, allowing the teachers to compare their students' performance with the performance of a representative sample of students of the same age, in the same grade or at the same level. The development of these tests was financed by the Flemish Ministry of Education. As a result, most of them could be sold to schools at relatively low prices.

The task-based tests were intended as models for the teachers, showing them how reading, listening, writing and speaking proficiency can be assessed in a functional way. Since some of these tests could be directly linked to the task-based, functional attainment goals issued by the Flemish government, the tests also showed great potential for heightening teachers' sensitivity for functional goals. In fact, the introduction of task-based tests may have great potential in 'pushing' teachers to make one of the main paradigm shifts that is involved in replacing or supplementing traditional teaching and testing practices with task-based ones i.e. to view language acquisition as the process of gradually building up the ability to perform increasingly difficult and varied language tasks, and, consequently, viewing language testing as the assessment of the learner's proficiency to do just that. Eliciting functional language use, then, is not seen as a smart trick used by skilful test takers to tap the knowledge of a linguistic system, consisting of elements and rules. Eliciting language use is, first and foremost, seen as the most direct method for teaching and testing language proficiency.

As a result, the tail may actually wag the dog: 'in that a communicative approach to language teaching is more likely to be adopted when the test at the end of a course is itself communicative. A test can be a very powerful instrument for effecting change in the language curriculum' (Weir, 1990: 27).

## 5.4  *The washback effect of task-based tests*

Some teachers may actually be more sensitive to changes with regard to their testing practices than to innovations directly trying to affect their teaching practices, because of the high importance they attach to the former. In this case, the washback effect of task-based tests on

teachers' pedagogical approaches may not be direct, but mediated by their heightened awareness of the essential attainment goals they have to pursue. In her study, Berben (2002) found limited evidence of a washback effect in the form of 'task-based teaching to the task-based test': some language use situations which were in the TOBA test but were found lacking in the second language curriculum were added by some teachers to their course.

The development and introduction of TASAN, another test devised by the Centre for Language and Education (Ramaut *et al.*, 2003), assessing the Dutch second language proficiency of 12-to-16-year-old NNS newcomers at the end of their first reception year in Flemish schools (see also Chapter 3 in this volume) explicitly attempted to 'wag the dog'. The test consists of a number of functional language tasks at a different level of complexity. It aims to offer teachers detailed information on what Dutch language tasks the NNS newcomer can already perform after one year of Dutch-medium education and which language tasks are still beyond his current abilities. The complexity of the tasks was manipulated using three types of parameters (for more details see Chapters 2 and 3 in this volume):

a parameters concerning the world represented in the task (e.g. 'here-and-now' versus 'there-and-then'; amount of contextual and linguistic support);
b parameters with regard to the tasks' cognitive processing demands;
c parameters with regard to linguistic complexity (vocabulary, syntactic structures, length of text).

The TASAN was introduced in the field through extensive inservice trainings and the publication of elaborate guidelines and articles, making clear to teachers and student counsellors what the intended uses of the test should be and how it was devised. The teachers were informed about the links between the tasks in the tests and the attainment goals. They were shown that what the newcomer was asked to do with the Dutch language in the test equalled the kinds of things the newcomers would be asked to do in their second year of Flemish education. As such, it aimed to provide the teachers of the first reception year with concrete illustrations of the attainment goals they should pursue. This naturally raised the ensuing question among teachers as to how newcomers can be prepared to learn and perform these target tasks. The tasks in the tests were presented by the test developers as examples of the kinds of tasks that could also be used in second language education. Reference was also made to task-based

syllabuses available on the market that include similar tasks and to inservice trainings on task-based language teaching. The way complexity was manipulated in the test, was used to illustrate to teachers:

a  the fundamental link between second language acquisition and the ability to perform more difficult tasks i.e. the most complex tasks in the test equate the target tasks in the attainment goals. Newcomers who have a relatively high level of Dutch language proficiency are able to perform these tasks in the test, whereas newcomers whose acquisition of Dutch progresses more slowly are only able to perform the simpler tasks.

b  that the way complexity was manipulated in the test, can also be of use to language teachers while they are interactionally supporting the newcomers during task-based activities. For instance, if learning tasks prove to be too difficult for some learners, teachers may manipulate one of the parameters (e.g. by providing more linguistic support through the negotiation of meaning or by providing more visual support)(see Chapters 8 and 9 for the role of the teacher in task-based language education).

Through developing insight in what tasks are relevant and what constitutes their complexity, teachers may develop more refined observation skills. In turn, if teachers succeed in extracting more information on their students' ongoing processes of Dutch language acquisition by eliciting relevant task performance from them and by observing what obstacles individual students meet when performing these tasks, they may, in the end, become less dependent on the administration of one particular test and learn to base their assessment of students' Dutch language proficiency upon a rich and varied base of 'real' language use situations throughout the school year.

Devlieger *et al.* (2003), investigating the implementation of task-based language methods and task-based tests in 12 Brussels schools, provide empirical evidence for these mechanisms. For instance, the introduction of KOBI-TV, the above-mentioned task-based observation instrument for young children, led some teachers to stop using more traditional tests and refine the checklists they were using when observing young children performing tasks. Quite typically, the teachers were fairly satisfied with the higher quality of the observations they could now carry out, yet wondered even more how the language acquisition of the infants lagging behind could be stimulated further.

All this shows, then, that the implementation of task-based tests should not be undertaken without making attainment goals for language learners explicit to all that are involved in administering a

test, nor without considering what pedagogical approach may be suited to allow learners to reach these goals. Otherwise, the introduction of task-based tests may leave teachers with many unanswered questions. Test developers, then, should not operate in a void, but should be crucially aware of the potential consequences of their tests for the teachers using them, and for the learners taking them.

## 6  Conclusions

As this article has shown, the development of task-based tests that yield reliable and valid assessment scores is an intricate and challenging matter. Nevertheless, task-based tests can provide strong models for teachers, particularly if their fears and doubts can be allayed by answering such questions as: 'What attainment goals or target tasks are being tested? How was the test devised? What aspects of learner performance are being scored?' If such questions are answered, task-based tests may not only constitute a powerful tool to assess language proficiency, but also to further the cause of more functional, performance-based testing and of task-based language education in general.

# 8  *The role of the teacher in task-based language teaching*[1]

Piet Van Avermaet, Marleen Colpin, Koen Van Gorp,
Nora Bogaert and Kris Van den Branden

## 1  Introduction

In task-based language teaching (TBLT), the teacher can be regarded in many ways as the learners' most privileged interlocutor. Although the teacher's role in TBLT differs from the role teachers assume in more 'linguistic', structure-oriented approaches, it is equally crucial. In this article, we will describe what the role of the teacher in TBLT can be, taking examples from primary, secondary and adult education. In Chapter 9 of this volume, which specifically draws on classroom observations in kindergarten, the role of the teacher is further explored.

In a nutshell, we will argue and illustrate that there are two core actions that we believe the teacher should take in order for tasks to elicit rich learner activity and to enhance the chances that this activity turns into actual learning. These are:

a  motivating the learner to invest intensive mental energy in task completion;
b  interactionally supporting task performance in such a way as to trigger processes such as the negotiation of meaning and content, the comprehension of rich input, the production of output and focus on form, which are believed to be central to (second) language learning.

These two actions should be central throughout the three stages that we can distinguish when describing teacher activity: the planning stage, the performance stage and the post-task assessment stage. In this article, we will use the term 'planning stage' for all the mental and physical actions teachers take in preparation of the actual educational activity that will take place. During the planning stage, teachers will have to assess to what extent the task they are preparing, whether taken from a syllabus or developed by themselves, has the potential to motivate the learners into meaningful action and to elicit the kind of cognitive and interactional processes assumed to

enhance language learning. At this stage, four questions suggested by Breen (1987: 25), may come in handy for the teacher to assess the task's potential:

1 What is the objective of the task? e.g. What particular skills will be/should be developed; what particular forms may be/should be attended to? Are objectives mainly in terms of accuracy, fluency or complexity? Are task objectives adapted to learners' needs?

2 What is the content of the task? e.g. Is the topic content familiar or unfamiliar to the learners? Is the topic likely to interest the learners?

3 How is the task to be carried out? e.g. Will learners engage in planning before the task?

4 In what situation is the task to be carried out? e.g. Will the learners work in pairs or groups or will they perform the task individually?

During the performance phase of the educational activity, the above-mentioned interactional and cognitive processes believed to enhance language learning are supposed to actually take place, and much of the teacher action will consist of drawing out the most of the task's potential for groups of learners and individual learners respectively. In the post-activity stage, the teacher, preferably together with the learners, will evaluate to what extent everyone was actually engaged in meaningful activity and whether there are any objective and/or subjective data available that indicate whether the activity was effective in terms of planned or unplanned language learning outcomes.

Obviously, the above-mentioned boundaries between planning, performing and assessing are to a great extent artificial. Both planning and evaluating also take place during the performance phase i.e. when the teacher is involved in setting up interaction with the learners. In addition, the sequence of these three stages should be interpreted in cyclical terms, rather than in strictly linear terms. Post-task assessment will often be the primary basis on which the planning of new tasks and activities is founded.

Throughout these stages of educational activity, the teacher and the learners will have to take into account and react to an array of local contextual conditions. These include, among others, particular characteristics of the learners (age, level of proficiency, needs, interests, status, etc.), characteristics of the teacher (subjective theories and beliefs, years of experience, etc.), features of the classroom environment (number of learners, available tools and syllabuses, etc.), policy regulations (curriculum, national exams, school regu-

lations, official timetables), time pressure and links with the outside world (e.g. parental demands, societal pressure).

We will build up this chapter by discussing a number of case studies of teachers whom we have observed while they were working with tasks. Our primary starting point for the discussion of these cases will be the actions the teachers take in terms of motivating the language learners (section 2) and supporting the learners' cognitive and interactional activity (section 3). We will integrate the teachers' handling of contextual conditions and going through the planning, performance and assessment stages of educational activity in our discussions of these same cases. Most of the examples we will use come out of primary education, though we believe the ideas we raise about the role of the teacher in this chapter can be inspiring for other contexts, such as secondary and adult education.

## 2 Motivating the language learner

In task-based syllabuses, learners are confronted with meaningful tasks. However, in the real-life classroom, this latter statement is not a fact, it is a hypothesis. To some degree, learners themselves decide to what extent they will actually engage with the task and perceive it as meaningful (Coughlan & Duff, 1994; Donato, 2000; Murphy, 2003). In classrooms where 20 or more learners are gathered, some learners may merely 'go through the motions' without investing any mental energy in the task. They may receive a copy of a newspaper article from the teacher, hear them deliver the instructions to read the article and solve the questions, wait for the task-performance phase to pass, passively witness the post-task phase during which the answers are collectively discussed ('collectively' standing for inter-action between the teacher and the most assertive or brightest students), and then close books like all the others. Breen (1987) calls this passive attitude the 'survival orientation'. He contrasts this with an 'achievement orientation', which drives the learner to perform the task with maximal effort. If it is true that the effect of learning activities is, at least partly, dependent on the intensity with which the learner approaches them (Laevers, 2000; Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001), one of the most prominent roles of the teacher is to try and get every single learner involved into actively engaging with the task that is presented.

This is a role for the teacher throughout a task-based lesson. Clearly, the introductory phase may be crucial in this respect (for more details on the stages in a task-based lesson, see Chapter 4 in this volume). Even if the syllabus-designer has taken care to develop tasks

that might interest the learners, it is up to the teacher to bring the task alive at the beginning of the lesson, in order to ensure that the students mentally construe the task in such a way that they can set clear and relevant goals for themselves and are launched into action as a result (Ames & Ames, 1989; Coughlan & Duff, 1994; Dörnyei, 2002). The goals the learners set for themselves need not necessarily be identical to the goals the teacher has in mind. In some interpretations of task-based language education, such as the process syllabus (Breen, 1987; Candlin, 1987) or the negotiated syllabus (Nunan, 1988), the goals themselves may be negotiated or constructed together with the learners, but even in the latter case, variation between individual learners in terms of goal-setting will be likely and substantial. What is crucial, however, from a task-based perspective, is that learners set a goal for themselves that motivates them to engage in an achievement orientation and in meaningful interaction, for this is what will promote their language development in the short and the long term.

We will illustrate how teachers can enhance this kind of achievement orientation with an example of a task taken from a Flemish task-based syllabus for Dutch as a first and second language. In this task, the pupils of the fourth year of primary education (10-year-olds) are asked to read a tourist brochure of a fictitious island called Palindria in order to find out whether the island would be a nice place for children to visit. Afterwards, in a second task, the pupils are asked to write a tourist brochure about their own country. In terms of Breen's above-mentioned questions guiding the teacher's planning stage, the syllabus guidelines in Figures 1 and 2 make a number of suggestions with regard to these two tasks.

During his preparation of this activity, Teacher M, whom we videotaped, decided to develop some personal initiative in order to further raise the children's enthusiasm for the reading task. He wrote a letter, which he put in an envelope and stuck to the blackboard before class began. When the children entered the classroom in the morning, their curiosity was aroused by the mysterious envelope on the blackboard. At the beginning of the performance phase, Teacher M walked up to the blackboard, opened the envelope and read the letter aloud (T = Teacher/P = pupil):

T: There are a few children here who have asked me: 'What's that letter doing there?' (takes the letter) Well, I got this letter on Friday, and it says: 'To teacher Marc and the . . . (shows the letter to a pupil)
P: Fourth year
T: 'The pupils of the fourth year . . . Van Steemansstraat' (shows the letter to the pupils)
P: 25. België

| Main objective | • The pupils' Dutch reading comprehension skills are further developed, particularly with regard to the reading of 'scientific' texts.<br>• The pupils' attention is focused on a specified list of vocabulary items.<br>• Pupils build up knowledge about the function and form of brochures.<br>• Pupils experience that texts are written with a particular intention and goal. |
|---|---|
| Topic | • The fictitious island of Palindria: is it an interesting place for children?<br>• Topic likely to arouse children's curiosity. |
| Task procedures led by the teacher | • First the teacher has an introductory talk with the pupils about tourist brochures, making use of a few real examples.<br>• Next, the pupils individually read the tourist brochure about Palindria.<br>• The teacher discusses the meaning of unfamiliar words and target words (as listed in the syllabus guidelines) with the children.<br>• The teacher has a discussion with the class about the contents of the brochure.<br>• The teacher builds the bridge to the next task. |
| Situation | • Classical discussion and individual reading. |

**Figure 1** Objectives, topic, procedures and situational guidelines of a task for primary education called 'A brochure from Palindria'. (From: *Toren van Babbel*, Wolters/Plantyn)

P: 1100
T: (together with the pupils) 'Belgium'
P: België
T: 'Belgium'
P: So that's a letter from another country.
P: That's from Ireland or so.
T: Yes, it might come from abroad ... I will do exactly the same as on Friday. You will see why. I opened the letter ... and I read: (opens the letter and reads aloud) 'Palindria, 3 March 1996.' Palindria? (looks at the children with amazement). 'Hi, my name is Tosca Mecuenge and I live in Palindria. I am ten years old and we want to find an exchange class. That means we will come to Belgium for a week, and you will come and visit Palindria for a week. What? Don't you know my country? Well, what a coincidence, I don't know much about Belgium either. I have already helped you. I have inserted brochures about my country in the envelope.

Greetings. Tosca. p.s. I have dark skin, two brothers and three sisters and I love reading and I have very long hair.' (turning back to the pupils) Can you imagine how amazed I was? Palindria! Have you ever heard of it?

P: It does not exist!

| Main objective | • The pupils' Dutch functional writing skills are further developed, particularly with regard to the writing of brochures.<br>• The pupils' attention is drawn to the fact that texts are written with a particular intention and goal.<br>• The pupils develop their skills with regard to structuring information in a text. |
|---|---|
| Topic | • The children's own country or a non-existing, fictitious country, more particularly, the things that children can do in that country |
| Task procedures led by the teacher | • First the teacher and the class discuss a number of features of the text the pupils are about to write: length, lay-out, etc.<br>• Next, the pupils write their text, working in pairs.<br>• The teacher walks around, helping and supporting the children's writing process, and drawing attention to the goal and function of the text that they are writing: convincing and charming the readers.<br>• Teacher provides feedback, after which the pairs finish the final version of their text and show it and read it aloud to the other pupils of the class. |
| Situation | • Classical discussion and pair work. |

**Figure 2**  Objectives, topic, procedures and situational guidelines of a task for primary education called 'Writing a brochure yourself'. (From: *Toren van Babbel*, Wolters/Plantyn)

The teacher's plan of raising the children's commitment appears to be successful. The children are intrigued by the letter and by the two tasks to which it refers: reading Tosca's brochure about Palindria and writing a tourist brochure for her about their own country in return. The children are quite aware that this is all fiction, but nevertheless, they open up to the world of mysterious islands and world tours. This is illustrated by the next excerpt, recorded a few minutes later:

T: Tosca asks you ... I'll take her letter once again (reads aloud). 'What? Don't you know my country? Well, what a coincidence, I don't know much about Belgium either.'

P: Then we have to write back to her.

T: What did you say?
P: Then we have to write back to her.
T: Yes!

The fact that a pupil, and not the teacher, decides that they should write a letter (with a brochure) underscores the children's strong involvement and illustrates their personal construction of the task. Some of the pupils clearly prefer to write a brochure about a fictitious island, rather than about Belgium. Since writing an informative and appealing brochure is the main goal of the lesson (and not learning about the geography of Belgium), the teacher decides to give in to this request in order to foster the children's motivation for the writing task. He also allows them to work in pairs, which the children find more agreeable than tackling the relatively complex writing task on their own.

T:      OK this morning we spoke about Palindria. The brochure of Palindria. So we decided together that this afternoon we would design a brochure of our country, or our own city, or you can even invent a country yourself. Right?
Pupils: (enthusiastically) Yes!

Raising the learners' enthusiasm for the task, arousing their curiosity, negotiating lesson content together with them in order to make sure that they will be willing to invest mental energy in performing the tasks they are given and developing an 'achievement orientation', is not confined to the introductory phase of the lesson. It is a task the teacher faces throughout all stages of task performance. Some tasks may be embarked upon by the learners with great initial enthusiasm, but if the tasks appear to be challenging or take much time to solve, learners may become demotivated, disinterested and may even 'drop out'. According to Winne & Marx (1989), learners, while engaged in a task, continuously appraise the progress they have made towards the intended outcome. When progress is slow, halting or backslides, intervention of some kind or a change of plan is needed to the rescue the situation. Winne & Marx refer to this as 'action control processes'. If learners do not succeed in self-regulating these action control processes, the influence of interactional partners may be decisive.

Teachers, then, should try to keep learners going and stimulate them to persist, even when the task appears to be more difficult or demanding than was first believed. Positive feedback is one of the major tools the teacher can use when affectively supporting learners during the task-performance phase. For instance, in the excerpt below, Joris and Mohammed, two pupils in teacher M's class, have

enthusiastically started writing their brochure to Tosca. They have decided to invent an island. Teacher M, circulating between the different pupil groups, kneels down to see what they have come up with:

J: Moris! Moris!
T: Boris! The country's called Boris?
J: Moris!
T: Moris? Hmm, sounds nice.
J: The 'Mo' of Mohammed and 'Ris' of Joris.
T: Hey, did you make that up yourselves? Great, write it down!
J: The country Moris.
T: That sounds very good.
J: Yes but with a 'h' like in Mohammed.

The teacher's positive feedback reassures the pupils that they are coping with the task in a very satisfactory manner. In this way, their own appraisal of the progress they are making and of their chances of being able to complete the task may be enhanced as well.

# 3  Supporting language learners

Tasks invite the learner to do purposeful things with language: reading the instructions to fold a plane and carrying them out, writing a letter to the mayor in order to ask for safer school surroundings, asking for road directions, listening to a radio newsreel in order to find out what is happening in the world (see also Chapters 3, 4 and 5 in this volume). These tasks demand a complex interplay of mental operations, all of which have to be performed in an integrated manner. For language learners, many of these mental operations may cause obstacles or difficulties, especially when tasks are supposed to be above the level of the learner's language proficiency. One of the teacher's main roles in TBLT, then, will be to support the learner in order to cope with the linguistic and cognitive problems he meets during task performance and to do this in such a way that the learner learns from it i.e. learns something new that can aid him to perform the same or a similar task better in the future.

## 3.1  Planned interventions

During the planning stage, teachers can build up insights into the task's language learning potential, the obstacles their students are likely to meet when performing the task and possible ways to react should these obstacles arise. These insights will be more accurate if the teacher's analysis of the task is thorough and the teacher's know-

ledge of the learners' actual level of proficiency detailed. For instance, for the majority of teacher M's pupils, the Palindria reading comprehension task was bound to raise problems of vocabulary, because many of the pupils were likely to be unfamiliar with particular geographical terms ('mountainous', 'climate', 'inland') that were deliberately used in the brochure by the syllabus designer in order to promote the acquisition of new (academic) vocabulary. These words may assume a prominent place in the performance phase, more particularly when the class is discussing whether Palindria would be a nice place for children to visit. As such, the focal attention paid to the meaning of the words deliberately inserted by the syllabus designer can be functionally embedded in a meaningful discussion (Van den Branden, 2005).

Another fine example of how the planning stage can inspire and guide teachers in providing interactional support during the performance stage is described by Samuda (2001). In her study, the teacher confronted her low-intermediate second language learners of English with a task that stimulated meaningful communication and discussion: the learners were asked to speculate on a person's identity on the basis of the contents of his pockets. The task was based around epistemic modality, derived from the area of meaning between 'yes' and 'no', and hence, presumably giving rise to the use of the modal auxiliaries 'must', 'might', 'may' and 'could'. In view of the fact that the students in the teacher's group had not as yet mastered these modals, drawing attention to the use of these specific verbs constituted one of the objectives of the activity. In their group interactions during the first phase of task performance, the students were found not to use any of the above-mentioned modal verbs. When the students presented their work to the rest of the class, the teacher first implicitly incorporated modal verbs in her feedback, but this did not lead to their use by the students, probably because they were concentrating entirely on understanding the teacher and on getting across their own meaning. The teacher then decided to interrupt the meaning exchange and to focus briefly and explicitly on form: she explained in very simple terms when modals like 'must' and 'may' can be used to express degrees of probability.

> T: . . . Hmm, let's, why don't we look at how the language works here? Just for a minute uhh (looking at objects). Let's see now. Did you have anything here you thought was 'probable'? Like 90%?
> Y: Businessman.
> T: Businessman. 90%. OK. So you're 90% certain he's a businessman, right? Here's another way to say this. You think it's 90%

certain, so you think he must be a businessman. He must be a businessman (writes it on board).                    (Samuda, 2001: 131)

The learners actively participated in this focus-on-form-episode. After this short explicit interlude, the focus on meaning was taken up again, giving the learners the chance immediately to make use of the forms that they had been alerted to. In this phase of the lesson, the researcher did find spontaneous instances of the students using modals.

## 3.2  Unplanned interventions

Learners construct their own version of the tasks they are faced with. For all the careful planning and manipulation of task features that can be carried out before the actual task performance phase, learners still have a strong say in what particular course the interaction elicited by the task will take, what particular forms they will attend to and how much negotiation of meaning there will be (Breen, 1987; Foster, 1998; Machado de Almeida Mattos, 2000; Murphy, 2003). Especially in tasks that elicit pair and group work, much depends on the objectives the interlocutors together assign to the task they are confronted with and the collaborative dialogue they build up together (Swain and Lapkin, 2001). The task in process may run in completely different directions from the task as a workplan.

In the example below, a young child (G) is telling the story of a popular television show he watched during the weekend. The show is about a dog called Samson and his boss, Gert, who live together in a house that is frequented by their friends (e.g. the mayor, Alberto the hairdresser, etc.). While retelling the story, G gets very excited:

G: Yes, and, and that dog Samson had a crocodile, and he he he put it on an iron and then it was broke, and then the mayor, he, no, no, he called to ask about such a crocodile, but no, no, first to Albert, Albertooo, and and, he didn't have one, and then to the mayor, and then yes yes, then there was crawling a real one . . .

T: Oh I see, but wait, tell me G, you told me Samson had a crocodile, was that a real, a real crocodile?

G: No, a plastic one.

T: And, what happened to the plastic one? Did Samson put that crocodile on an iron . . .

G: No, Gert.

T: Ah Gert, I see.

G: Yes, and Samson kept crying, because his crocodile was gone.

T: I see, and that's why, and then Gert called the mayor.

G: No, first Alberto.
T: To ask him whether they had such a crocodile too, right?
G: Yes, yes, but Alberto did not have one, and he said, I will give the mayor a call, and then, yes, Alberto asked the mayor for a real crocodile.
T: But the mayor, I am sure he did not have a real crocodile?
G: No, but he knew someone who did.
T: Oh no!
G: Yes, yes, and that person put a crocodile.
T:  A real one?
G: Yes, he put it in a case, and he brought to it Samson's and Gert's house.
T: Jesus!                            (Van den Branden, 1998; our translation)

G's initial account of the story is very confusing. He only seems to have very basic linguistic resources at his disposal to reconstruct the story: his vocabulary is basic, his sentences are short and often incomplete. His major problem, however, is how to reconstruct the story line in a clear and coherent manner, such that it can be mentally reconstructed by someone who has not seen the show. His account is full of gaps and mental leaps: too much information remains implicit. The teacher uses this opportunity to provide G with implicit feedback on this lack of coherence. He acts like a genuine listener in this excerpt. He does not even have to pretend that he cannot follow (as teachers often must), because he did not see the show and is really interested in what G has to tell. His interventions are clearly goal-directed and meaning-focused: by asking questions, he makes clear at what points G's initial account was vague or incomprehensible. For instance, the fact that G did not explicitly describe the difference between the plastic and the real crocodile made his account in-comprehensible. This is one of the first issues the teacher brings to the surface.

The teacher does not explicitly correct G's formal errors: for instance, in the original Dutch version, G uses an incorrect simple past tense of the verb 'to crawl', but the teacher ignores it, probably because he fears that explicitly correcting or discussing this error would distract G from his focus on meaning and might demotivate him from further participating in the conversation. In other words, the teacher keeps focusing on the essence of the speaking task: getting across a story line in a clear and coherent manner. Implicitly, the teacher hopes that this conversation may alert G to the fact that things that are clear inside his head are not necessarily clear in the listener's head. Mediating between the demands of the task and the learner's level of language proficiency, the teacher puts the initiative for solving comprehension problems, running the conversation and

initiating the topic into the hands of the learner. In fact, through acting as a cooperative and genuinely interested listener, he succeeds in offering interactional support that strengthens the learner's initiative and mental effort, rather than reducing it or taking it away.

This is also the case in the excerpt below, where the teacher and a young NNS child are having a conversation about a story that the child has listened to. The story is a chapter from a famous Dutch book about the young boy Pluk, who lives all alone in a building called the Petteflet, where he spends a lot of time with his animal friends. The young NNS child's Dutch second language proficiency is relatively low compared to the other children in the class, so the teacher uses this conversation for two ends: to give the child a chance to develop her speaking proficiency by speaking (Swain, 1985; 1995) and to prepare her for the next episode in the story that will be read to the children the next day.

T: Oh no, that's not good, is it, the Tortelgarden will have to disappear. All the trees have to go away, and then the little mice won't have a place to live.
P: No, bu ... bu ... Pluk won't let them.
T: No, that's right. But what do you think he could do, what could Pluk do to make sure that all the animals can stay in the garden?
P: I don't know.
T: Neither do I ... Just imagine that you were Pluk, and you were asked to help. What would you do?
P: (*long silence; she is thinking*)
T: What would you do?
P: Do the mice away.
T: Where?
P: Hmm... to the Pettefet.
T: Hmm, that sounds like a good idea. You could take the mice to the Pettefet. But all the other animals living there, the birds, the squirrels and the butterflies.
P: (points at drawing). There's butterflies.
T: Yes, and they live in the Tortelgarden too. Would you take the butterflies to the Petteflet too?
P: Yes.
T: And the hedgehog too?
P: ... No, but tha ... Madame Helle won't let them.
T: Oh no, you are right. Madame Helle won't have animals living in the Petteflet. So if Pluk brings all these animals with him, then Madame Helle is going to complain to the porter, and then maybe Pluk himself will have to ...
P: Go.
T: Go, yes. And Pluk wouldn't want that, would he?
P: No.

T: What else could Pluk do? Can he do something else? . . . I don't know. Have you got another idea?
P: Ang . . .
T: Hmmm?
P: Beang
T: What did you say? Be angry?
P: Yes.
T: Oh I see, yes, that is not a bad idea at all. Be angry. But whom does he have to be angry with?
P: The men.
T: Oh I agree, the men who want to do away with the Tortelgarden. Would you do that, would you have the courage?
P: No.
T: No. But Pluk might. You know what, next time we will read on in the book, and then we will find out, whether Pluk will be angry with these naughty men.                    (Unpublished research by Van den Branden)

The teacher's interactional style in the excerpt is very responsive. She follows the child's lead, picks up what she says and expands on her ideas. The teacher uses recasts, confirmation requests, clarification requests and extensions to subtly, and mainly implicitly, insert form-focused feedback into her meaningful replies (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Muranoi, 1996, 2000; Ortega, forthcoming; Wells, 1985). In doing so, she shows that she is genuinely interested in the child's ideas and, at the same time, provides her with a lot of salient input and feedback. Many of the teacher's contributions produce the more complex and correct versions of what the child wanted to say. Both from an affective and from a linguistic point of view, then, the teacher's interactional support may be claimed to be of high value for fostering the child's language acquisition. At the same time, the whole conversation stimulates the child's general cognitive development: the teacher challenges her to think of solutions to a complex problem and to evaluate the implications of the solutions she suggests.

This is a very good example of how some of the teacher's interventions may simultaneously work towards a complex cluster of educational goals. This complexity actually contrasts with the simpleness and naturalness of her interventions. At first sight, the teacher is just having a pleasant and rewarding conversation with the child, tuning into whatever fascinates the child and making sure that the child is provided ample space to nominate the topic, verbalize her thoughts and experiment with ideas and language. All this is strongly reminiscent of Wells' main conclusions of the Bristol study into first language acquisition (Wells, 1985: 415–16). In this study, the parents whose children acquired language most smoothly and rapidly:

were not concerned to give systematic linguistic instruction but rather to ensure that conversations with their children were mutually rewarding. They assumed that, when their child spoke, he or she had something to communicate, so they tried to work out what it was and, wherever possible, to provide a response that was meaningful and relevant to the child, and that invited a further contribution. By employing strategies that enabled their children to participate more fully and successfully in conversation, these parents sustained their children's motivation to communicate and this, in turn, increased their opportunities to discover the means for realizing their communicative intentions more effectively.

In a similar vein, Van Avermaet (1995: 265), in a Flemish article about the role of the teacher in TBLT, admits:

Quite regularly, I ask myself the question why we, as teachers . . . , upon entering a classroom, shut a door behind our back, not only in a literal, but also in a figurative sense? Why do I partly lose, ignore or deny the conversational skills of the spontaneous interlocutor, supporter and mediator, that I have acquired as an adult? A fond embrace between the world inside the classroom, and the world outside, is definitely worth considering.

## 3.3  Striking a balance between teacher initiative and learner initiative

Just like parents, teachers can be the 'more knowledgeable' partner of the learner without always having to display their expertise overtly and explicitly (Lantolf & Aljaafreh, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978). In the excerpt below (taken from Van der Aalsvoort & Van der Leeuw, 1992: 88–9), students of the first year of secondary education have been working together in groups of three during a content-based lesson activity. The lesson is supposed to offer the pupils the opportunity to explore the topic of reproduction in nature through a series of problem-solving activities and, at the same time, provide the pupils with a chance to develop their academic speaking skills by verbalizing their hypotheses and trains of thought. Three students: A, B and C have observed a small water animal through a microscope, but are now facing a scientific mystery (T = teacher):

T: You are quiet. What have you discovered so far?
A: Well, we have reached the conclusion . . . that when the pool dries up . . .

the little animal also dries up, because the animal is made of water. Mostly water.

T: Well, if that happens, that would be very strange … because the animal lives in the pool… and when the pool dries up the next year again, where do all these new generations of little animals come from? I mean, if your little animals dry up together with the pool, that would mean they die.

B: Well, I think, it will probably have to do with repro … reproducing, when it when it, when there is enough water and … then when it … puts something, something half living and half dead in dried mud than it will be …

C: It could lay eggs or something … Then

T: That's a good idea, you mean that it lays eggs when it is still wet.

B: And then she keeps them in a shell and then when the water returns, they break open.

T: That's one possibility. Now, did you learn about another way when you were learning about different animals, that … survive hardship, you know, surviving the winter or periods without food. What else can animals do?

The teacher's opening intervention in the excerpt shows that he is aware that the students are facing a problem. The identification of the problem will very often constitute the first phase in a task-based mediation. Sometimes the teacher can point to a problem, but in other cases, as in the excerpt above, the students can be asked to verbalize their problem themselves. This might help them to focus more sharply on their problem. At the same time, this might promote their speaking proficiency. In the example above, the problem is not only identified, the teacher and the students also attempt to solve it together. The teacher does not solve the students' problem right away, for instance by starting to give a lecture about theories of reproduction. Rather, the teacher 'nudges' (Lynch, 1997) the learners towards a further exploration of the problem and towards finding possible solutions to it. He does this by challenging their theories (in his second intervention), by giving them hints on where they can find additional useful information or by guiding their train of thought (last intervention), but also by giving them positive feedback to the fruitful ideas they come up with (third intervention). In contrast with the first excerpt we discussed, the teacher in the 'reproduction excerpt' feigns ignorance to a certain extent: obviously he knows the solution to the pupils' problem, but he pushes it aside in order to share the collaborative dialogue. Still the expert (and acknowledged as such by the pupils), the teacher uses his knowledge in a very strategic way: he uses it not to give clear-cut answers, but to ask well-chosen questions that guide the learners' active knowledge construction.

This is further illustrated in Van den Branden's study (1997; 2000a) into the effects of negotiation of meaning on second language acquisition, that involved two pedagogical experiments. In these experiments, the interaction conditions in which the teacher was involved turned out to have the strongest effect on the students' comprehension of input and production of output (see also Chapter 4 in this volume). In the first experiment, 10-year-old pupils were asked to read a Dutch detective story consisting of a number of chapters. After each chapter, an individual comprehension test was administered. The pupils read the chapters in various conditions:

a  individual reading of a baseline version;
b  individual reading of a premodified version;
c  reading of the baseline version + negotiating about the meaning of difficult words and phrases with a peer;
d  reading of the baseline version + lockstep negotiation with the teacher.

Condition (d) had the strongest effect on the individual students' level of comprehension. Not only was the fact that comprehension problems could be discussed with a more knowledgeable partner crucial, but so was the way in which the negotiation was organized by the teacher:

> One explanation for the positive results in this condition might lie in the difficulty of the text. In other words, the assistance of only one other pupil or of a priori made input modifications may, for many subjects, not have sufficed to solve all, or the most important, comprehension problems. During the collective negotiation, pupils were looking for the meaning of unfamiliar input collectively, with the researcher (teacher) taking care that the more reticent and less proficient pupils also participated in the negotiation process.
>
> (Van den Branden, 2000a: 437)

This, again, points to the importance of the pupils' active involvement in solving the problems they meet during task performance. Van den Branden (2000a) points to additional advantages of the teacher's interactional support. First, the teacher's participation guaranteed that the pupils arrived at the correct meaning of a word or phrase: whenever the pupils came up with incorrect hypotheses, which they very often did, the teacher intervened to put them back on the right track by way of subtle hints or negative feedback. Swain & Lapkin (2001) have argued that teacher feedback may be crucial in terms of solving learner uncertainty or pointing out incorrect

solutions. Secondly, the teacher also supported the pupils on the affective level, for instance, by preventing them from giving up searching too soon (cf. the role of motivation and persistence discussed in section 2).

The second experiment in the same study (Van den Branden, 1997: 618) involved a speaking task, built around an information gap task, in which the students had to describe drawings to the teacher. A pre-test–post-test design was set up, aimed at studying whether the teacher–student interaction had any effect on the pupils' subsequent individual performance of the same speaking task. This proved to be the case. The students' descriptions in the post-test were significantly longer than those in the pre-test and were of a higher quality: the students offered more of the essential information that was in the drawings and used a wider vocabulary. While interacting with the students, the teacher's interactional style had again been very responsive. The teacher followed the lead of the students, refraining from immediately imposing his viewpoint when they failed to come up with certain information. As the excerpt below shows, the teacher started negotiations with relatively general clarification questions, leaving much space for explorative thinking by the students. Only when it became apparent that the student needed further support, did the teacher's guidance become more explicit and directive e.g. through the use of suggestive confirmation requests (S = student; T = teacher):

S: And then she gets off her bike.
T: Why? Why does she get off her bike?
S: Don't know. She is home, I guess.
T: Home, you say? Can you see her house, or her front door?
S: No, just a churchyard.
T: Hmm strange place to live, if you ask me.
S: (*laughs*).
T: But, but if she's not home yet, why does she get off her bike then?
S: Don't know (*long silence*).
T: There's no clue in the picture?
S: (*after another long silence*) No.
T: Is, uhm, is there something wrong with her bike?
S: No … Oh yes, now I see. She's got a flat tyre.
T: Aah, a flat tyre. That must be it.

## 3.4  Providing different support to different learners

When adopting a responsive interactional style, teachers will naturally differentiate between the different learners in their classroom:

they will adapt the quantity and quality of their interactional support to the learners' specific needs. This is clearly a point in the educational process where the teacher takes over from the syllabus. Fine-tuning feedback and support to learners is, and will probably remain, a human privilege. It cannot be delegated to skilfully designed courses or flashy multimedia materials. The interlocutor has the power to listen and observe, to ask questions, give advice, raise suggestions, assess reactions and adapt all these actions 'online' all the time. The teacher may even decide to adapt learning goals to whatever is learnable (whatever the learner is ready for) 'on the spot'.

All this implies that in classrooms where many students are gathered, and the teacher's time and energy to interactionally support learners are limited, two basic choices will have to be made: the first choice has to do with which learners will be supported to which extent, the second choice has to do with the particular support that will be given to each of the learners or groups. Let us return to teacher M's classroom where the students have now started writing their tourist brochure for Tosca in groups of two. Teacher M is circulating. He has chosen to give the most support to those who need it the most and to allow the pupils who are coping well with the task to work on their own. A and T, for instance, have been discussing the name of their invented island for almost five minutes. When M passes them for the second time, he urges them to get on with the real task i.e. writing the brochure.

T:      Are you still looking for a name?
Pupils: Yes!
T:      Come on, pick one now!

Other pupils need exactly the opposite kind of support: they have to be praised for the fact they are making such good progress. Still other students may find it hard to get their thoughts organized well on paper. The syllabus guidelines point the teacher to the fact that, faced with the task of writing a tourist brochure, many 10-year-old children will probably have difficulties meeting the demands of the genre, such as organizing information in coherent paragraphs. For instance, F and E have been working very hard, but have only produced a page full of deletions and crossing-out after 15 minutes.

T: Would this be a nice folder?
F: No!
E: No.
T: What would you do to . . .
E: It's just a first draft.

T: So, how are you going to do the final version? Do you have any ideas to make it nicer?

F: With bold letters!

E: Yes.

T: Yes! But you are going to do that later? Now you're just writing down all your thoughts?

A little while later, teacher M returns to these two pupils. They have started writing their final version. M's interventions are now of a different nature: they become slightly more directive, because he notices that F and E have not yet succeeded in structuring the information in a clear and coherent way:

T: So maybe this we could describe as what the island looks like ...
And this is about the main attractions. You could take the folder of Palindria as an example (takes the folder). 'Beautiful country', 'The weather'. Have you written something about the weather?

F: No.

T: Or about food?

E: Yes! Right here!

T: It doesn't have to be exactly the same as this one (shows the folder). You might do something completely different. I'll show you another folder (*the teacher fetches some other folders*).

This excerpt shows that teacher M tries to adapt the degree to which, and the way in which, he intervenes in the students' task performance to their level of success in reaching the task's crucial language learning goals. In another lesson we observed, students of the third year of primary education were writing a letter of complaint to a toy firm. After the teacher had been circulating for a long while and most of the students had finished their first draft, the teacher stopped the task performance phase and asked some of the students to read aloud their letters. The teacher then used this phase to alert the students to the fact that all their letters lacked some crucial information. Through a joint evaluation of the letters that were read aloud, the students discovered the problem and then resumed their final draft. Collective brainstorms, temporarily interrupting task performance, may be used to reflect explicitly on the process of task performance or to focus on form, particularly those forms that are crucial for the performance of the task.

## 3.5  The teacher as intruder?

Teachers face a difficult choice in deciding whether or not to intervene when a student or pupil is performing a task. They have to make this decision on the basis of their own perception of the goals

of the task, the goals their students have set for themselves, how far the students have progressed with a particular task and they have to bear in mind the details of their students' needs and personalities. Some of the decisions that teachers actually take in this respect, even though they are inspired by the best intentions, may be said, from a task-based perspective, to have the opposite effect. A number of classroom observations we conducted as inservice trainers and a number of classroom interaction studies that were conducted in Flemish schools (e.g. Devlieger *et al.*, 2003; Devlieger & Goossens, 2004; Linsen, 1994; Lison *et al.*, 2002; see also Chapter 10 in this volume) revealed that, in supporting task performance, teachers often exhibit the following patterns:

a  *Solving problems themselves instead of stimulating the students to do so.* For instance, teachers often (mis)use the introductory pre-task phase for these purposes. For example, they start explaining all the difficult words in a text or read the text aloud before the students are allowed to read it for comprehension. Or in order to prepare their students to perform a writing task, teachers put a complete and detailed scheme of the text on the blackboard, reducing the writing task to a gap-exercise. Or they immediately provide the correct answer when the pupils fail to find crucial information in a reading comprehension task. These patterns can typically be observed with teachers who (i) have low expectations of their students' abilities and learning potential; (ii) cling tightly to the methodological principle that students should only be confronted with tasks (or exercises) *after* they have been instructed; or (iii) prefer to exert tight control over the process of task performance, both from a cognitive and from an organizational point of view (see also Chapter 10 in this volume).

b  *Raising the complexity of the task by imposing additional performance demands.* For instance, the teachers in the above-mentioned Flemish studies showed a tendency to overemphasize linguistic correctness in functional speaking and writing tasks. During a classroom observation one of the authors conducted, children of the second year of primary education (8-year-olds) were asked to write a short story (in Dutch) about the lovely lion Loeki who was asked to mail a package that was too big for the mailbox. The observer was sitting next to a non-native speaking pupil who had started writing very enthusiastically. However, after a short while, he stopped writing because he could not figure out how to verbalize Loeki's solution in Dutch (i.e. Loeki actually tickled the mailbox so that it opened its mouth very widely).

Exactly at the moment the pupil was looking for words, the teacher reached the pupil's desk, read what he had written down so far and pointed with his finger to a minor linguistic error the child had made in the first sentence. It took a long negotiation of form for the child to comprehend the teacher's feedback, but the strongest effect of this intervention was that the child's motivation to go on writing dropped sharply. Not only had the teacher pointed out a mistake (instead of praising his progress), but the support he had needed the most (i.e. how to say what he wanted to say) had been completely missing.

All this underlines that, for teachers, 'teaching the task-based way' not only has to do with becoming acquainted with certain theoretical principles and developing particular interactional skills, but also with developing a learner-centred attitude. From an affective point of view, the success of task-based lessons, at least partly, depends on:

a  the teacher's (high) *expectations* of the students' ability to perform tasks and of the fact that they will learn language from performing the tasks;
b  the teacher's *willingness* to share responsibility for task performance and control of the learning process with the students;
c  the teacher's *empathy* for the particular affective and cognitive problems individual students face and for their specific language learning needs ;
d  the teacher's *flexibility* in adapting his support and interventions to different students and allowing for different routes and rates of language acquisition in his classroom;
e  the teacher's *tolerance* of interlanguage errors, disparate opinions, diversity in task performance conditions and use of languages other than the language of instruction if the students prefer to do so or find that helpful;
f  the teacher's *enthusiasm* with his learners' performances, ideas and opinions, in task-based teaching in particular and in teaching in general.

If the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to implement task-based lessons in classroom practice are scrutinized and listed, 'teaching the task-based way' may seem very complex. On the other hand, every time we observe teachers who have adopted TBLT and who reach high levels of performance (and appreciation) with their students, we always have the feeling that 'task-based teaching' is actually a very simple and 'natural' thing to do, at least as long as teachers keep in mind guiding principles of task-based language

teaching, such as 'goal-directedness' and 'meaningful interaction', both implying a high degree of learner-centredness.

## 4 Conclusions

There can be no doubt that we need far more classroom-based research that empirically describes the way that teachers handle tasks in the classroom (Bygate, 2005). From the limited number of case studies that we were able to describe in this chapter, we can infer that teachers play a crucial role in exploiting the vast learning potential of the tasks in question. Taking continuous care to cater for their students' motivation to invest mental energy in task performance and interactionally supporting their students while doing so, teachers can create powerful language learning environments, especially if they take actions that are:

a  consistent with the methodological principles underlying TBLT and believed to foster second language learning;
b  consistent with the core goals of the curriculum i.e. the target tasks that learners are supposed to be able to perform;
c  consistent with local contextual conditions.

Teaching the task-based way is not only rewarding for the students. Many of the teachers in the examples that we used in this chapter emphasized that through adopting (some of) the principles under-lying a task-based classroom practice, teaching becomes 'more fun', 'more varied' and more rewarding (see also Chapter 10 in this volume). Teacher C, whom we videotaped for a 'good practices video', believes that task-based language teaching:

> is just more interesting. And they (the pupils) learn more. . . . Eventually, you have to grow . . . in everything you do. Just like we don't work with a 10-year-old computer anymore, because computers have changed completely . . . You have to try it out. You have to give it a chance. And if you like the results, go for it!

## *Note*

[1] This article is based to a large extent on Colpin & Van Gorp (1997), Van Avermaet (1995), Van den Branden & Kuiken (1997) and Van Gorp (2003). All of these articles were written by researchers and inservice trainers of the Centre for Language and Education, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Kuiken excepted), in order to communicate a theoretical and practical view on the role of the teacher in task-based language education to teachers, headteachers, teacher trainers, syllabus developers, educationalists and school counsellors in Flanders.

# 9    *A box full of feelings: Promoting infants' second language acquisition all day long*

Machteld Verhelst

## 1  Introduction

Much like the previous chapter in this book, this chapter explores the role of the teacher in task-based language teaching. Its specific focus will be on second language classrooms populated by very young learners.

The literature on the role of the teacher in task-based language teaching (e.g. Nunan, 1989; Richards & Lockhart, 1994; Samuda, 2001; Chapter 8 in this volume) emphasizes that language teachers should attempt to motivate their students into using the target language for meaningful purposes and interactionally support the latter while doing so. Many of the tasks that teachers are supposed to bring to life in the classroom in a lively and motivating way challenge the students to solve complex problems, negotiate meaning while doing so and interact with their peer interlocutors and the teacher. Rather than solving problems themselves, teachers are supposed to build scaffolds that support the learner's own mental activity and, hence, the latter's cognitive and linguistic growth.

The question can be raised, however, whether teachers should, and can, abide by these principles with learners who lack the basic linguistic skills to take verbal initiative as well as the abstract levels of cognitive reasoning skills that many tasks involve. Such is, for instance, the case with extremely young second language learners (infants from 2.5 to 5 years of age) whose cognitive development has only reached pre-operational stages (Donaldson, 1984; Piaget, 1972; Satterly, 1987; Wood, 1998) that precludes abstract thinking and who, while not having fully developed their mother tongue skills to advanced levels, have to start acquiring a second language. In many countries around the world, numerous children of minority language speakers who start their educational career in a majority language school system face this daunting challenge. For many of these children, specific educational programmes have been set up, such as 'Head Start', 'Early Start' and 'High/Scope' (cf. Bennett, 2004;

Cotton & Conklin, 1989; Epstein, 2003; Hopkins, 2001; Nicaise, 2001; Sameroff *et al.*, 1993) aiming to further the children's linguistic, affective and intellectual development, and, in this way, safeguarding their future chances of educational success.

In view of the early biological and intellectual age of these children, explicit, structure-based second language teaching approaches do not apply. These methods demand a level of abstract thinking and metalinguistic insight beyond the young children's cognitive abilities. For these infants, second language education typically takes the shape of content-based approaches, in which the children are confronted with pleasant, playful tasks, stimulating them to try and understand or produce basic language in order to carry out actions in the concrete world of the here-and-now. Even more so than for adults, young learners should, from a socio-emotional point of view, feel comfortable and safe in order to get intensively involved in such language learning activities (Laevers, 2003; Verhelst & Verheyden, 2003).

In Figure 1, the main ingredients for a powerful language learning environment for young children are visualized.

From the perspective of the learner, this figure should be read as outlined in Figure 2.

From the perspective of the teacher, this figure should be read as outlined in Figure 3.

This chapter will explore the particular ways in which teachers of second language learners in kindergarten can support their pupils' early second language acquisition while confronting them with suitable tasks. I will particularly focus on the quality of teacher interventions related to the 'inner circle' of interactional support (section 2) and teacher interventions related to the 'outer circle' of creating a safe and positive environment for task-based language learning (section 3).

## 2  The impact of input and interaction

My discussion of teachers' interactional support of young children's early second language acquisition is largely based on my PhD study (Verhelst, 2002; 2004), which was conducted in a class of 11 second language learners of Dutch. There were no Dutch mother tongue speakers in the class, nor were the children confronted with Dutch outside the school walls. The study was conducted while the infants spent their very first weeks at school. The infants in the sample either spoke Moroccan-Berber, Moroccan-Arabic or Albanian as their mother tongue. The Brussels neighbourhood where they lived was predominantly Francophone. The children were sent to a Dutch-
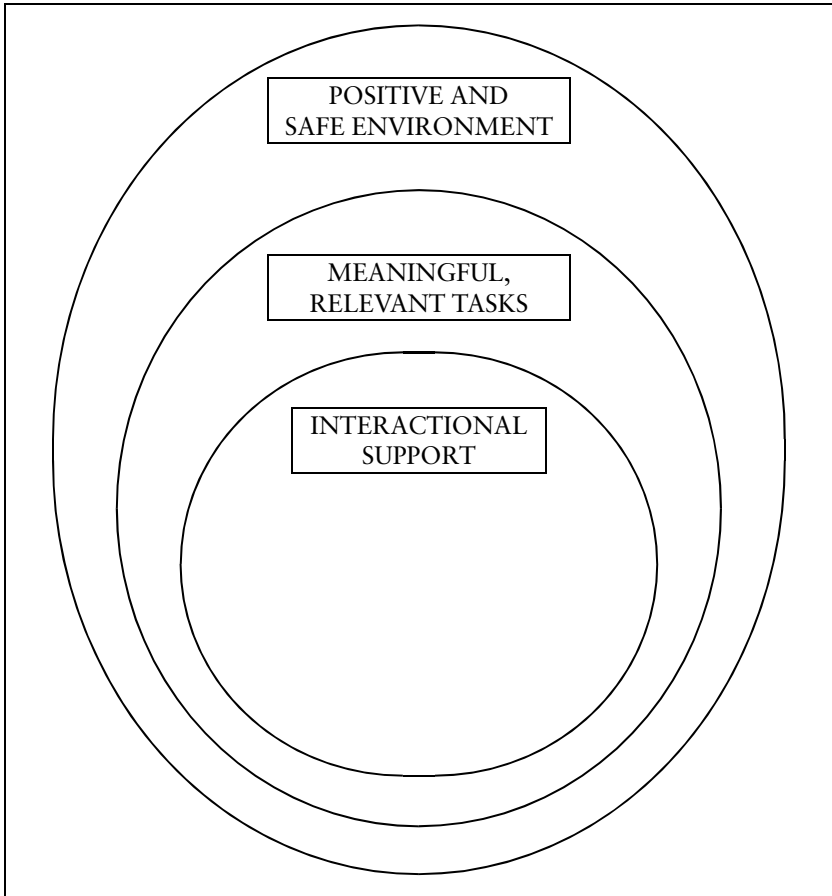
**Figure 1**  Powerful learning environments for language learning

medium infant school by their parents between the ages of 2.5 to 3 years, possessing no Dutch language skills whatsoever. The main reasons why these parents chose a Dutch school have to do with (a) the high-quality reputation that Dutch-medium schools enjoy; (b) the parents' desire to find a school in the immediate neighbourhood; and (c) the growing awareness of the economic profit Dutch language proficiency might bring to the children in the future (De Belder & Huyghe, 1998).

I audiotaped all the Dutch language input provided by the teacher to the children during the first ten school weeks. This corpus, then, represented the complete corpus of Dutch input that the children were confronted with during these ten weeks, and on which their

| Circle | Meaning |
|--------|---------|
| Within a positive and safe environment ... | The learners feel happy, safe and competent. They are allowed to take the initiative, to make mistakes and to experiment with language. They feel motivated to engage in tasks and to explore particular aspects of the world. They are allowed control over their own learning process, and are stimulated to bring in their own knowledge of the world, values and opinions and to utilize their full linguistic repertoire in the classroom. |
| ... learners are presented with meaningful and challenging tasks, in which language use is a means to reach motivating, relevant and functional goals. These tasks contain a (bridgeable) gap between the demands of the task and the learners' current level of language proficiency. | The learners invest mental energy in performing the tasks: they confront and explore the world of the task, and try to comprehend and produce meaningful language while performing the task. |
| The learners are provided with interactional support from other learners and/or the teacher. | The learners try to tackle the problems that they meet along the way. They ask for help when this is not spontaneously provided, try to identify their problems and try to solve these with the help of others. |

**Figure 2**   The three circles of a powerful language learning environment from the young learner's perspective

early acquisition of Dutch was based. The children were set oral reception-based and production-based vocabulary tests after 5, 10 and 15 weeks. In the reception-based tests, a lexical item consisting of one word (e.g. 'box', 'cookie') and three pictures were shown to the child. The child was asked to point to the picture corresponding to the lexical item. In the production-based test, the child was shown a picture and asked to name the object in the picture. In addition to the tests, the children's spontaneous production of Dutch was recorded and analysed.

| Circle | Meaning |
| --- | --- |
| Within a positive and safe environment ... | Teachers take care that all learners feel safe and well. They support their learners' self-confidence by providing positive feedback, taking them seriously, listening to them ... Teachers allow the learners to take initiative, to make mistakes and to experiment with language. They motivate their learners to engage with tasks and to explore particular aspects of the world. They allow the learners to take control over their own learning process, stimulate them to bring their own knowledge of the world, values and opinions and to utilize their full linguistic repertoire in the classroom. |
| ... teachers present the learners with meaningful and challenging tasks in which language use is a means to reach a motivating, relevant and functional goal. These tasks contain a bridgeable gap between the demands of the task and the learners' current level of language proficiency. | Teachers select and/or develop meaningful and relevant tasks. They give clear instructions about the tasks. If necessary, they prepare learners for the task by building up their knowledge of the world, by motivating them or by brainstorming on the process of task performance. They respect the essentially functional and meaningful goals of the task. |
| Teachers provide the learners with interactional support, and give them the opportunity to give each other interactional support. | Teachers provide interactional support to those learners who need it (the most). They adapt the quantity and quality of their interactional support to the particularities of the learners' task performance, and of the learners themselves. They negotiate about the meaning of incomprehensible input and push output, they provide feedback to the learners, they mediate between the task demands and the learners' level of language proficiency. They do not take away all learner initiative while interactionally supporting task performance. They stimulate peer interaction and cooperation, and exploit the potential of working with heterogeneous groups. |

**Figure 3** The three circles of a powerful language learning environment from the teacher's perspective

The analysis of the teacher's input during the first ten school weeks showed that not all the children received the same amount and quality of Dutch language input from the teacher. Although much of the input was directed at the whole class, or could be overheard by all the children, a substantial part of the teacher's input was addressed to individual children. Some children received far more personalized input than others. Especially 'productive input generators' (Seliger, 1977) i.e. children who asked the teacher questions or who were talkative and, in this way, elicited feedback and replies from the teacher, and 'receptive input generators', who followed up the teacher's instructions and gave explicit signals that they understood what she said, received substantially greater input than less assertive or extrovert children. The children differed both in terms of received input and in their spontaneous output: children who were personally addressed by the teacher more frequently and who were very involved with what was going on in the classroom demonstrated a higher quantity of spontaneous production in the Dutch language.

In the vocabulary tests the children scored significantly higher on the reception-based tests than on the production-based test. The scores of the reception-based test after 15 weeks were significantly higher than the scores on the reception-based test after 10 and 5 weeks. Quite strikingly, even after as little as 5 weeks, the 11 children's test scores showed strong variation. The analysis of this variation focused on the parameters of the input that stimulated language acquisition. The first of these factors was frequency, a variable that has been shown to be of crucial importance in many (though not all) second and first language acquisition studies (e.g. Ellis, 2001; Ellis, 1994; Pine, 1994; Scherfer, 1993; Viberg, 1996). The frequency with which words occurred in the teacher's input significantly correlated with the children's scores on the reception-based test after ten weeks: words that were highly frequent in the teacher's input were acquired by the children significantly better than words that were of low or medium frequency. There was no significant link between frequency and the scores of the production-based test, however. In fact, a number of low-frequency words were acquired by most of the children, indicating that other features of the input besides frequency also played a significant role.

One of these factors was saliency. A word is salient when it catches the child's attention and results in input being 'apperceived' (Gass, 1997; Schmidt, 1998). Words that were (often) used in the context of a task being performed appeared to be particularly salient to the children, especially if the child was being called upon 'to do some-

thing' i.e. perform a small, concrete task such as sitting down, putting something in a drawer, kneading dough or clay, etc. These words had a strong communicative and functional value for the children because they needed to be actively followed up. At the same time, because they related to an action, the children were supported by the concrete context of the here-and-now in trying to understand the meaning of the input. In other words, not only did the children *want* to comprehend the words in action contexts, they also stood a good chance of *being able* to do so, especially when the teacher was responsive to the child's comprehension (or incomprehension) signals e.g. by paraphrasing or repeating the input when the child failed to comprehend or when they failed to perform the task they were occupied with. Further, words that were offered in an action context appealed to the children in a multisensory way. This may have strengthened the impact of the input on the child's mind.

The above-mentioned results strongly emphasize the crucial link that needs to be established for young children between language and task: vocabulary that was tied to task-based actions that were relevant and interesting for the child made a significantly stronger impact on the child's language acquisition than vocabulary that was presented and used outside a task-based action context.

In addition to the frequency and task-based saliency of the input, a number of child-related variables also had a significant impact on the acquisition scores. For instance, the 'receptive input generators' scored significantly higher on the first and second reception-based tests. 'Productive input generators' and children who imitated the teacher's input scored significantly higher on the production-based test, corroborating Swain's output hypothesis (1985, 1995).

In sum, the results of the study emphasized the importance of task-based input as a driving factor behind early second language acquisition. It strengthens the idea that teachers should not only provide a high quantity of input to their learners at elementary level, but also high-quality input. For young infants, this appears to be language that is relevant to their needs, is personalized, has high functional value and appeals to them in terms of eliciting a reaction or a concrete action. The study also stresses that teachers should be conscious of the needs of *all* the learners in their class: especially the children who are less assertive and spontaneous or who pick up the language at a slower rate and who require strong and personal attention from their teacher. Providing them with the same quantity and quality of input and feedback while they are performing exciting tasks will be absolutely necessary in order to safeguard their chances of second language development in the long term.

## 3  A box full of feelings

As mentioned in the introduction, for young children it is essential that the task-based interactional support is provided by the teacher in a way that does not threaten the child's fundamental feelings of safety, socio-emotional comfort and self-confidence (Laevers, 2003; Verhelst & Verheyden, 2003). In this section, I will elaborate on these basic principles, by discussing the videotapes of two teachers in action, as they tried to put task-based principles into practice in their kindergarten class. The first teacher worked with one of the activities of a task-based method developed by the Centre for Language and Education (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven). The activity was called: 'Experimenting with clay'. In this activity, children were given clay for the first time and were encouraged to play with it and make all kinds of things out of clay. The activity was videotaped in the first infant class (with children of 2.5 years) in an Antwerp school with an intake of nearly 100 per cent of non-native speakers (NNSs) of Dutch. The children in the class were born in Belgium. Their parents (or grandparents) were of Moroccan origin. According to the infant teacher, two children in this class, Melek and Merve, had far more limited Dutch language skills than the others.

The teacher in the second example worked with a syllabus developed along similar pedagogical lines: 'A box full of feelings' (Kog & Moons, 1994). This syllabus includes a number of activities having to do with four basic emotions: happiness, anger, sadness and fear. During the activity that we videotaped, the children listened to short stories and poems, and were asked to tell the teacher which of the four feelings predominates in the story. Afterwards, the children were invited to tell something that had happened to them and that had stirred up strong emotions. This activity was conducted in a small group of the third infant class (5-year-olds), involving four Moroccan and five Turkish children. The children had different levels of Dutch language proficiency. A standardized test of Dutch language proficiency (Gysen *et al.*, 1999; see also Chapter 7 in this volume) showed that three of the eight children continued to have a very low proficiency of Dutch: Nadire, Erren and Gultsum.

### 3.1  Creating a safe learning environment

Both teachers who were videotaped were strongly aware of the fact that children who feel safe and well in a classroom, may be expected to be more open to the activities and the language input they are confronted with than children who feel ill at ease, are afraid or feel

threatened. This claim goes back to Krashen's (1985) idea of the affective filter, which may act as a 'mental block' that prevents input from becoming intake when the learner is scared, lacks self-confidence, does not feel competent or lacks motivation. Krashen's concept of the affective filter might be reinterpreted in terms of attention theories (Schmidt, 2001), stating that in order to attend to language input, the child's mind must be free from other worries. This may be especially important for children that come from poor and deprived home environments (Laevers & Van Sanden, 1996; Nicaise, 2001), because of the wide gap between the world they are familiar with at home and the world they encounter at school.

Teachers may contribute to the learners' affective well-being in many ways. One outstanding linguistic tool they have at their disposal is the feedback they give to the infants' actions and output.

**Excerpt 1**

| | |
|---|---|
| Teacher: | Cermin, you can put a sticker next to 'scared'. |
| | (*Erren uses a Turkish word.*) |
| Teacher: | Did you say 'scared', Erren? |
| Erren: | No. |
| Teacher: | What did you say? |
| Cermin: | About things, that window. |
| Teacher: | Ah yes, on the sticker, there's a window. |
| Abdeslam: | Miss, I want to say something! |
| Teacher: | Abdeslam, what do you want to say? |
| | (*Abdeslam uses another Turkish word.*) |
| Teacher: | Hey, I don't know that word! |
| All children: | Gone! |
| Teacher: | Ah. But Abdeslam, you are a Moroccan boy and you speak Turkish! |
| Bunjamin: | Miss, I teached him! |
| Teacher: | So, you taught him? Wow! Yes, you have taught me some words too. |

The teacher in the excerpt obviously appreciates what the children have to say. She explicitly devotes attention to their output and extends their utterances. She does not overtly correct the children's linguistic errors. She focuses on meaning, not on form. By inserting correct linguistic forms in recasts, she gives the children implicit feedback (Doughty & Williams, 1998; see also Chapter 8 in this volume). Young children who are corrected systematically and overtly may refrain, in the end, from adding their own contribution to the conversation. The same applies to the teacher's attitude towards the children's mother tongue: forbidding young children to use their own language might restrain their overall language pro-

duction by increasing the affective threshold they have to cross. Tolerance towards the children's mother tongue and explicit attention to it might, on the other hand, contribute to a learning climate in which the children feel accepted for who they are.

Safe learning environments present children with as few threats as possible. Children should not be forced to talk, especially not in lockstep conditions because of the 'audience effect', but language production should be stimulated in a positive way. One way of lowering the affective threshold children have to cross when producing output is to use a projection device. This might be a doll or another medium that young children can address in order to express their feelings, or that teachers can use to provide children with feedback.

If young children are given positive feedback, this may enhance their feelings of self-confidence. Experiences of success may greatly add to the child's self-confidence and to their openness towards the outside world. Success, however, should not be equated with perfect products. Children should be allowed to make mistakes and to create their own product, starting from the task they were given. Teachers' feedback should primarily aim to promote the children's activity and focus on processes rather than specific outcomes.

**Excerpt 2**

| | |
|---|---|
| Yasmine: | I want to tell something too. |
| Teacher: | Yes Yasmine, tell something to the other children. |
| Yasmine: | Me buy something and my mama had become angry. |
| | (*This is exactly the same as the child before her had said*.) |
| Abdeslam: | I had told that already! |
| Teacher: | Yes that was just the same as Abdeslam's story. And now this also happened to you. Did anything else happen as well? |
| Yasmine: | Upstairs play Barbies. |
| Teacher: | Have you played with your Barbies upstairs? Did anybody give that Barbie to you? |
| Yasmine: | Saint Nicolas. |
| Teacher: | (*teasingly*) And then you must have been very sad because Santa gave that Barbie to you? |
| Yasmine: | Happy! |
| Teacher: | Ah, you were happy, then you can add a sticker there. |

In the excerpt above, the child's initial response, limited (and reproductive) as it may appear, is not rejected by the teacher. By picking up her output and asking further questions, she stimulates the child to elaborate her contribution to the conversation. In the same turn, the teacher elegantly neutralizes Abdeslam's reaction, which might otherwise have upset Yasmine. In this way, the teacher creates an open and positive climate in the class. The children are

allowed to take initiative, to try out new things, knowing that the teacher will assist them. Video recordings of this teacher show that she has a habit of bringing children who want to tell her something physically close to her, creating a feeling of 'sharing' (Donaldson, 1997): the child is not alone, the teacher will carry part of the burden. The teacher's physical posture contributes to the child feeling safe, for instance when the former makes herself small, sits next to the child or takes her on her lap.

## 3.2  Motivation as a condition for learning

Motivation to perform language tasks has been said to have a strong impact on language acquisition (Dörnyei, 2002; Laevers, 2001; Van Lier, 1996; see also Chapter 4 in this volume). Motivation may be enhanced, at least to some extent, by the task itself. When tasks in a syllabus are fascinating, exciting and adapted to young children's perspectives and interests, the children may be strongly inclined to engage actively with them. For teachers, however, it may not always be easy to find out what very young children are interested in. Many young children do not say a lot. Teachers, then, should closely observe their pupils: by watching them play, they can discover starting points for joint attention, joint activity and task-based conversation, and hence for language acquisition (Bruner, 1978; Tomasello, 1992; Tomasello & Farrar, 1986).

However, the selection of motivating tasks only gets the job half-done. Even when a given task in a syllabus seems intrinsically attractive to the children, it is mainly up to the teacher to realize the task's full potential. The teacher has to bring the task alive. She can start doing this by introducing the task as an exciting endeavour or a true challenge. In the task-based materials developed at the Centre for Language and Education, the introductory pre-task phase has a double function: motivating the infants to perform the task and warming them up on the one hand, and acquainting them with the topic (the world) and the concepts that are associated with it on the other hand.

**Excerpt 3**

Teacher:    Listen! Who's knocking at the door?
            (*Another teacher brings a little puppet made of clay.*)
Teacher:    What is this? A doll?
Youssra:    Scared!
Teacher:    You don't have to be afraid. Look. Hi children. Can I shake
            hands? I am Mohamed.
            (*The children shake hands with the little man of clay.*)

| | |
|---|---|
| Teacher: | It's soft, isn't it? You can push it. |
| | (*Rachid breaks off an arm.*) |
| Youssra: | Is broke! |
| Teacher: | Don't worry, miss can fix that. One two three! (*she fixes it*) |
| | (*A little bit later, the teacher has made a ball out of the clay.*) |
| Teacher: | I am going to do a little trick. Abracadabra. Where is the ball now? It's gone! Roll roll roll. |
| Abullamid: | Ball. |
| | (*The teacher makes a ball and throws it up in the air.*) |
| Teacher: | Yes, do you want to touch it too? Hokus Pokus. I'm going to push . . . What am I making now? |
| Youssra: | Cookie. |
| Teacher: | A cookie. (*She bites it*) Can I eat it? |
| | (*The children shake their heads.*) |
| Teacher: | No, it doesn't taste nice, that's not a sandwich. |
| | (*The children ask the teacher to make an apple, banana, etc.; she carries out their instructions.*) |

The teacher in the excerpt above succeeds in using the pre-task phase to make the children excited about experimenting with clay, which will constitute the performance phase of the task. She accomplishes this by the way she sets up the interaction with the children. The children suggest all kinds of ideas (things you can make with clay), which the teacher readily accepts, adding to the children's self-confidence – their ideas matter, they are worthwhile. At the same time, she can also show the children the infinite possibilities clay offers, adding to the children's excitement and implicitly acquainting them with a number of techniques to manipulate the material. Language is used here as a tool to create joint task-based attention and joint task-based action; it is not a goal in its own right. And, because it is used in this way, it adds to the children's involvement with what is going on, including the language that is used.

This is an attitude that the teacher tries to keep up throughout the entire activity. When the children start experimenting with the clay, she remains enthusiastic and responsive to the children's endeavours and questions (Bornstein & Tamis-Lemonda, 1989; Landry *et al.*, 2001). When they have difficulty reaching the goal they set for themselves, she tries to support them.

**Excerpt 4**

| | |
|---|---|
| | (*The children are experimenting with clay. After a while, the teacher gets the feeling that the activity needs a new impetus. The children are only rolling and knocking the clay.*) |
| Teacher: | Look, I am making a hole! |
| | (*Youssra does the same, the other children keep on rolling and knocking.*) |

Teacher:        I'm going to get something. Look.
                (*She takes a basket with sticks and shapes. The children start groping about in the basket.*)
Abdullamid:  Miss look! Olé olé. (*He puts a ball on a stick and starts waving it about.*)
Teacher:        I am going to do that too. Look, an ice cream. Do you want to taste some? Look, a ball on a stick. It doesn't taste that good, does it? (*She gives the ice cream to Melek.*)
Melek:          No, not good, huh?
                (*Melek proudly shows her ice cream to everybody and tells Merve in a mix of Dutch and Arabic that the teacher has made it for her.*) (*The teacher takes a seat next to Merve. Her clay construction won't work.*)
Teacher:        Shall I fix it? It's finished. Oops, now it's broken. Abracadabra, now it's fixed. (*Merve continues with new enthusiasm.*)

The teacher has introduced new materials, which provides the children with challenges and opportunities for new experiments. This impetus also renews their interest in the language input the teacher has to offer and offers them new openings for the production of output. Task-based activities like these, then, demand a high degree of flexibility from the teacher who is expected to be able and willing to deviate from the prescriptions in the syllabus and to follow the leads and cues offered by the children.

## 3.3 Maximizing language learning opportunities

A safe class climate and motivating tasks do not so much *cause* language acquisition, rather, they create favourable contextual conditions for the true causal variables to be at work. Research into early first and second language acquisition by young infants (e.g. Damhuis, 1995; Pine, 1994; Verhallen & Walst, 2001; Wells, 1985; Verhelst, 2001; see also the first section of this chapter) indicates that three causal variables may be crucial for early (second) language acquisition:

a  extensive, rich and personalized language input;
b  sufficient opportunities to produce output;
c  feedback on the language learner's comprehension of input and production of output.

This again underlines the limited reach of syllabuses. Strictly speaking, syllabuses cannot provide opportunities for language input and output or personalized feedback to young infants. Their interlocutors have to do so. In infant classes, teachers are the learners' most privileged partner: they can provide the learner with rich input,

can stimulate production and can interactionally follow up their comprehension and production by negotiating meaning of input that learners do not understand and by pushing output which learners find hard to produce. In this way, problems occurring during task performance may be solved through the use of language. Either the infant will signal their problem themselves or the teacher will do so. Joint negotiation that aims at solving the young learner's personal linguistic problems may be full of salient language input (Tarone & Liu, 1995), capturing the child's full attention.

### Promoting input comprehension through interaction

In powerful language learning environments, children are provided with abundant and rich language input at any moment of the day. Providing input does not need to be restricted to the language activities that are explicitly scheduled in the curriculum e.g. reading a story, class conversation or drama activities. In fact, the whole day, from early in the morning till late in the afternoon offers kindergarten teachers the chance to stimulate a child's language skills. Whether they be handicraft activities (such as experimenting with clay in the example above), physical exercises, walks through the park or free play, each activity offers numerous chances to engage in meaningful conversations with the children and to offer them rich and elaborate input all day long.

By following the children and translating their actions, input may be adapted to their personal interests. In this way, infants may experience the input as fascinating, meaningful and personalized, and as a strong invitation to join the conversation. The chance that the input will become intake may increase when mental anchors are provided that facilitate the child's conceptual 'grip' on the meaning of the input (cf. section 2 in this chapter). For instance, the input may be:

- strongly associated with physical actions;
- associated with visual, auditory or tactile experiences;
- associated with language the child has already acquired;
- associated with the child's previous experiences or knowledge of the world.

Input may further be made more comprehensible to the child by means of linguistic strategies such as topicalization, rephrasing and paraphrasing, and by rehearsal of the same input in different contexts. On the other hand, the input should not be too easy either, but should ideally be just above the learner's current level of language

proficiency in order to make sure that there are new things to learn. This implies that when providing input the teacher should be alert to the child's level of comprehension and, if necessary, use some of the above-mentioned strategies to facilitate comprehension.

In the 'Box full of feelings' activity, the teacher facilitates comprehension of the Dutch labels for 'happy', 'sad', 'angry' and 'afraid' by having the children act them out. In this way, she turns rather abstract concepts into concrete experiences. Since abstract concepts abound in academic language (see also Chapter 5 in this volume), contextualizing input by associating it with physical actions or visual illustrations is a powerful strategy to aid the acquisition of academic Dutch by young children of NNS.

**Excerpt 5**

| | |
|---|---|
| Teacher: | I'm going to take a picture of you, and you know how? I want you all to be very angry. Just get up and pretend that you are very angry. |
| | (*The children strike an angry pose.*) |
| Teacher: | And now you're all sad! |
| | (*Gultsum does not do anything. The teacher notices this non-verbal signal of non-understanding.*) |
| Teacher: | Do you know, when you are sad, Gultsum, for instance when you have lost your doll. |
| Bunjamin: | Or when you fall. |
| Teacher: | What do you do then? |
| | (*Gultsum pretends to cry.*) |
| Teacher: | Yes, now you are sad. Click clack (sound of a picture being taken). |

The excerpt shows that besides visualizing and acting out the teacher uses negotiation of meaning to solve comprehension problems. When the children show their non-understanding (verbally or non-verbally), the teacher exploits these 'problems' to add new language to their current interlanguage resources (Van Den Branden, 2000a). Equally, the production of output may be difficult to many young language learners. So, the teacher will have to 'push' their output or will verbalize what the children intend to say, but for which they lack the linguistic means. As a result, solving comprehension problems and eliciting and extending output may be a more rewarding strategy than systematically simplifying input or fine-tuning output opportunities to, or even under, the learners' current level of language proficiency (Yano *et al*., 1994; Doughty & Long, 2003). Classroom observations in infant schools show that teachers are often inclined to simplify the language in story books by shortening the text, abandoning difficult words or replacing them with

words the children are all familiar with. As a result, the language learning environment may become less powerful in the long term.

## Stimulating the production of output

Children who are not that talkative will have to be stimulated to produce output at a certain point in their linguistic development. In the early phases of second language acquisition, output should not be forced. Many children acquiring a second language need a 'silent' period, allowing them to build up receptive skills. This, however, should not prevent the teacher from trying to elicit output in a positive and safe way. If children only stick to listening, their productive skills will develop at a slower rate (Swain, 1995; Izumi, 2003). By giving children motivating tasks, they may experience an intrinsic urge to express their feelings or convey a message. Similarly, infants may be tempted to react to the teacher's 'bold' statements or may be more inclined to speak when they are allowed to nominate the topic or determine the turn of the conversation themselves. Teachers may further enhance output by reacting in a positive and interested way to the child's contributions and building on them by asking further questions that elaborate on the child's topic. In this respect, open-ended questions may be more stimulating than closed questions. Similarly, process-oriented questions ('how' and 'why') and experience-based questions ('what did you do at the zoo?') may elicit more output than questions soliciting the display of factual knowledge. Infants may also be granted more comfortable speaking turns when the interlocutor increases waiting time, secures their turn (i.e. makes sure that no other interlocutor steals it) and allows for silences during which the children can put their thoughts together. The teacher will often have to support the children in fully verbalizing their meaning intentions. For young infants at their early stages of second language acquisition, communicative adequacy prevails over linguistic accuracy, and implicit feedback on linguistic errors over explicit correction.

### Excerpt 6

| | |
|---|---|
| Teacher: | Nadire, what does that child look like? |
| Nadire: | Angry. |
| Teacher: | How come she is angry? |
| | (*Nadire does not say anything.*) |
| Teacher: | The child is angry, isn't she, Nadire? Why is she angry? You can see it, can't you, Nadire? |
| Nadire: | Eating. |

| Teacher: | Do you think she wants to eat? Well maybe she does. Where does she want to eat, do you think? |
| Nadire: | Home. |
| Teacher: | Yes, she would love to go home, wouldn't she? Why does she want to go home? |
| Nadire: | Playing football, they says no, them not playing football. |
| Teacher: | Yes, that's it, she would like to play football and those children tell her she can't! |
| Nadire: | Yes, cause they laugh, cause she not can. |
| Teacher: | The children laugh at her a little, don't they? |
| Nadire: | Cause she wants to go home, she wants that. |
| Teacher: | Yes, she has become so angry that she wants to go home. They make a fool of her, and she does not like that. Very good, Nadire. |

Nadire, one of the pupils whose Dutch language acquisition is still in its earliest stages, is faced with the big challenge of explaining why the child in the picture is angry. Initially, she does not say anything. The teacher encourages her, breaks through her 'block' by giving her a sense of self-confidence. The answer Nadire gives is not 'correct' in the strict sense of the word, because her story does not correspond to what is in the picture at all. The teacher decides to ask further questions in order to support Nadire into reaching a solution to her problem. The teacher opts for open-ended questions, which has the advantage that the child cannot give an 'incorrect' answer. Positive feedback, on the other hand, encourages Nadire to further compose her own story. The teacher refrains from verbalizing everything instead of Nadire, but rather invites her to think for herself. As a result, Nadire can experience success that she has created all by herself.

## Mediating between the task and the child

Some children need intensive and extensive interactional support to learn language from the task-based activities they engage in. In traditional education, these children tend to be isolated for the sake of remedial teaching at some point in the educational process. Remedial teaching often goes together with lowered teacher expectations and reduced task demands, and with a focus on separate linguistic elements, since full-blown conversation is deemed beyond the reach of the child. Paradoxically, the remedial language lessons tend to deny the child many tools, such as visual contexts, that they can use to get access to meaningful input and to produce output, and they tend to feature far less motivating tasks from the perspective of

the child. For instance, in a Flemish remedial class for young NNS infants we visited, the children were told to reproduce the labels for pieces of fruit, while the 'more advanced' children were enjoying themselves in another classroom making fruit salad.

In contrast, teachers should be stimulated to interactionally support the 'less advanced' children more intensively during meaningful activities, in order to make sure that the children pick up as much as possible from the activities going on. A number of 'mediational strategies', which are derived from the literature on dynamic assessment (Gysen *et al.*, 1999; Haywood & Tzuriel, 1992; Lidz, 1991; Vanmontfort, 1997) may be very inspiring for teachers in this respect. The list of mediational strategies includes:

a  *Strategies for regulating behaviour.* This involves focusing the attention of the learner on particular aspects of the tasks (for instance, glossing over irrelevant details), giving hints and eliciting answers that can lead to problem-solving.
b  *Strategies enhancing transcendence.* This involves supporting the learner's hypothetical thinking ('what would happen if . . .?', 'what would you do if you were her?'), making explicit certain relations and 'bridging' from the task-experience to other experiences (e.g. previous experiences).
c  *Strategies for breaking through mental blocks.* These involve relating to the overall meaning and purpose of activities, and strengthening the learner's feeling of self-confidence.

Teachers can be trained to build in these mediational strategies in their interactions in a natural way (see Chapter 10 in this volume). Rather than consciously or mechanically applying the parameters in their interaction, they should learn to recognize them on a conscious level as a natural ingredient of learner-centred interactional support. The excerpt below shows a number of instances of these:

**Excerpt 7**

| | |
|---|---|
| Teacher: | What I'm going to say right now is a little difficult. So listen very carefully. It won't be a problem, right Cisel? |
| | (*The teacher focuses the children's attention, because they will be doing a task that will require their full attention. In the same turn, she strengthens the children's feeling of self-confidence, by assuring them that they will be able to perform the task.*) |
| | (*The teacher is about to read a poem. The children are invited to nominate the dominant feelings.*) |
| Teacher: | 'I am not lucky: the TV has broken down. What should I do before going to bed? |

Mum tells an exciting story.
And wrestling with daddy, what a mess!
Another game to play, and then another kiss.'

Children:        Happy! Happy!
Teacher:         Yasmine, do you agree? Do you choose 'happy' too?
Yasmine:         Yes.
Teacher:         Now think again of what I have said. When the TV is broken, then . . .
                 (*Giving hints and eliciting answers: the children only nominated the dominant feeling at the end of the poem. The teacher wants the children to think more deeply about the whole story, for other feelings are involved. So she provides a hint by pointing back to the beginning of the poem. At the same time, she supports the children's hypothetical thinking, by using an 'if, then'-construction.*)
Bunjamin:        Sad I think.
Teacher:         Yes, first I was a little sad, but then playing with mama, and wrestling with daddy and making lots of noise. . .
Children:        Happy!
Teacher:         That made me happy.
Children:        Happy! Happy!
Teacher:         Yes Yasmine come on, we are going to be happy, because happy is much nicer than sad, isn't it?
                 (*Making relations explicit.*)
Teacher:         Do you like making noise with daddy and playing games with mama?
                 (*Bridging: the contents of the poem are applied to the children's own world.*)
Yasmine:         Yes!
Other children:  Me too.
Gultsum:         I want to play a game with you.
Teacher:         Ah yes, then you will be happy too, when you come to play a game together with me.
                 (*Transfer, bridging: the child's remark is linked to the focal point (feelings) of the activity that the children are performing. Relations are verbalized explicitly.*)

The excerpts that I discussed in the previous subsections also included many instances of the use of these mediational strategies. In Excerpt 1, the teacher does not disapprove of the child's use of their mother tongue, but instead provides positive feedback. This attitude may enhance the children's self-confidence, adding to their feelings of safety and being appreciated. Excerpt 2 shows how the teacher, through eliciting answers and giving hints, pushes the child to give a richer answer than she would have been able to do on her own. In Excerpt 4, the teacher follows up on the child's train of thoughts,

strengthening the latter's self-confidence. Excerpt 6 illustrates how a teacher can break through a child's mental block.

## 4 Conclusions

Stimulating the second language acquisition of young children should start at the very beginning of their academic 'career'. Infant schools are potentially powerful language learning environments, at least when a number of conditions are fulfilled. Opportunities to 'feed' language acquisition are present throughout the whole school day: teachers should beware of tightly splitting up the day into language-related activities and other activities. Any activity in which the child is performing a goal-oriented task-based activity offers ample opportunity to promote (second) language acquisition, provide children with rich input and chances to speak and feedback. Infant classes should be 'friendly' to the language learner: safe and positive, appreciative of the children and of the other languages they speak, open to what the children have to say and the tasks they want to perform out of their own initiative, and inviting them to listen to the other children. All children should be granted a sufficient amount of speaking turns, be allowed to nominate the topic, to experiment while producing output and receive personalized feedback allowing them to redesign their interlanguage hypotheses. Children should be interactionally supported in many different ways to contribute to the conversation and to the activity, in a way that is rewarding for all parties involved.

Teachers interacting with children in this way will notice that their contributions to the conversation may have simultaneous effects on the three circles of a powerful learning environment illustrated in Figure 1. With a single sentence or well-chosen reply, sometimes even with a nod or a word, the teacher may put the children at ease, make the task more motivating for them and support them interactionally so they can comprehend the language input or produce language. Above all, it is a learner-centred attitude that is fundamental in supporting second language acquisition in young children.

# 10 *Training teachers: Task-based as well?*

Kris Van den Branden

The role of the teacher in task-based language education has been described in a number of publications (e.g. Prabhu, 1987; Samuda, 2001; Willis, 1996; see also Chapters 8 and 9 in this volume). In these articles, the teacher is presented as a guide, a counsellor and a coach who tries to motivate his students to perform tasks, gives them clear instructions and supports the students' task performance, both at the cognitive and affective level, in such a way that they further develop their language proficiency. Rather than providing all the course content, delivering elaborate and explicit monologues on the structure of the language or the meaning of isolated words, the teacher tries to act as a true interactional partner, negotiating meaning and content with the students, eliciting and encouraging their output, focusing on form when appropriate and offering them a rich, relevant and communicative input.

Appealing as these ideas may look on paper, there is very little research available on how experienced teachers and student teachers perceive this particular role, on whether they are able and willing to put it into practice and on whether this particular role clashes with other roles teachers have in mind or take up in their classrooms. In this respect, the question can also be raised whether teachers or student teachers can actually be trained to teach 'the task-based' way? How, for instance, do experienced language teachers, who have been using a grammar-based, form-focussed syllabus for years react to in-service training in task-based language education or to task-based syllabuses? Do experienced teachers, who are introduced to new task-based syllabuses, adapt their classroom practices, or do they prefer to adapt the new syllabus? What should inservice and preservice training look like in order to be successful, and what, ultimately, can be called 'success' in this respect?

These are some of the main questions that are addressed in this chapter. The tentative answers that I will provide will mainly be based on a number of Flemish empirical research studies that accompanied the introduction of task-based language teaching on a nationwide level in Flanders. A state-subsidized support programme,

including inservice training and the introduction of task-based sylla-
buses, was offered to Flemish language teachers in primary, second-
ary and adult education in an effort to raise the quality of language
education of Dutch as a first and second language (see also Chapter 1
in this volume). The results of the empirical studies accompanying
this support programme deepen our insight in the potential and the
limitations of teacher training, particularly with regard to the imple-
mentation of task-based language teaching.

## 1  Teacher cognition and teacher actions

At a general level, language teachers' principal aim is to create
powerful language learning environments for all their students. With
this aim in mind, teachers try to take appropriate actions in the
classroom. As Figure 1 shows, what teachers do in the classroom
should have a positive effect on what their learners do; and the inter-
play of teacher and student interaction should result in language
learning.
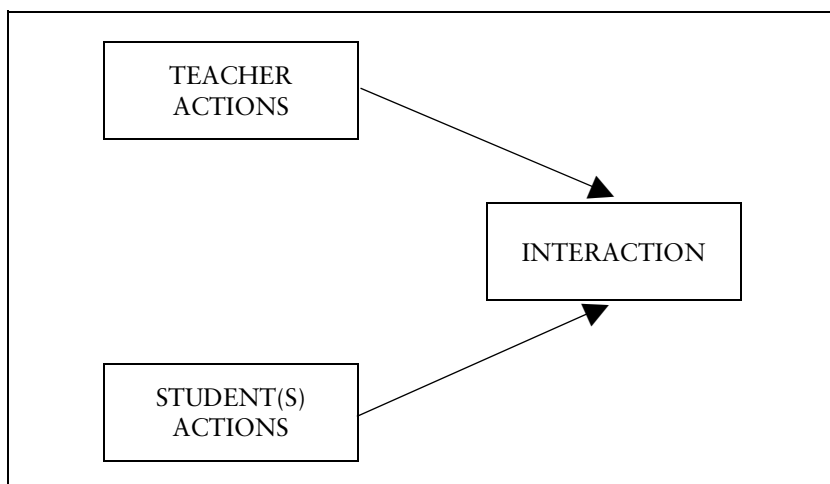


**Figure 1**  Teachers' and students' actions resulting in classroom interaction

Though Figure 1 may have face validity for teachers and learners,
it is simplistic in a number of ways. What teachers do in the
classroom cannot simply be described in behavioural terms (e.g.
'Teacher A shuts the window and asks  the class a question'), but is
the result of continuous and intense mental activity. On a second-to-
second basis, teachers have to assess what is going on in their

classroom and take decisions on the actions they will take. In the instance above, before shutting the window, Teacher A has probably had to choose between shutting out the noise that was coming in through the window and allowing the cool air to enter the classroom on this balmy summer day. At the same time (while shutting the window), the teacher is wondering whether the introductory phase of the lesson is not taking too long and is looking for a question that nicely sums up the pre-task discussion in order to get on with the activity. Simultaneously, she is keeping an eye on two students who are not paying attention anymore and whom she knows may become quite disruptive for the other students when they get bored.

In a review article on teacher cognition in language teaching, Borg (2003: 81) aptly describes teachers as 'active, thinking decision-makers who make instructional choices by drawing on complex, practically-oriented, personalized, and context-sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts and beliefs.' What language teachers do in the classroom is inspired by what they know, believe and think. They do not act on blind impulse, nor do they continuously leave on the automatic pilot (Blanton & Moorman, 1987; Fang, 1996). On the contrary, research shows that language teachers base their classroom actions on the ideas they have about very many different aspects of their profession. These include ideas about education in general and language education in particular, about the school context in which they have to operate, about their students, about the curriculum, about language learning, and so on. The literature on teacher cognition offers many taxonomies, using a range of terminologies, in which this wide variety of convictions, thoughts and beliefs are separated into different categories (Johnson, 1995; Lortie, 1975; Nunan, 1996; Pajares, 1992; Shulman, 1987). However, while providing a basic insight into the complexity of the cognition teachers rely on, these taxonomies do not reflect what actually goes on in teachers' heads. For teachers, distinctions between learner characteristics, contextual variables and cognition related to education are blurry at best, and components of their knowledge, beliefs, opinions and intuitions are inextricably intertwined (Grossman *et al.*, 1989; Verloop *et al.*, 2001; Woods, 1996).

The relationship between teacher cognition and teacher action is not unilateral, but interactive. Teacher cognition not only feeds and inspires actions in the classroom, but actions taken in the classroom also feed their perceptions: each will influence the other as the teacher works from day to day (Breen *et al.*, 2001; Fang, 1996). Moreover, teachers' actions and perceptions not only influence each other, they are also influenced by, and have an influence on, the
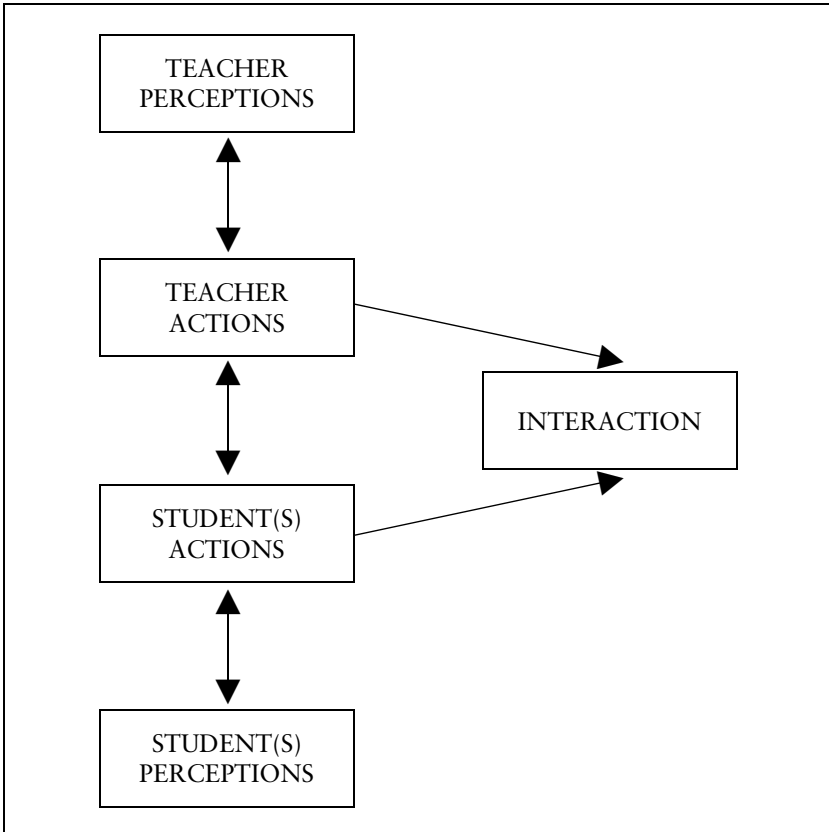
**Figure 2**    Actions, perceptions and interaction in the classroom

students' perceptions and actions. Interaction in the classroom, then, can be characterized as a complex interplay between the actions of the different actors involved. These actions are inspired by, and in turn inspire, the same actors' perceptions (Brophy & Good, 1986).

Recent empirical research has shown that what teachers do in the classroom is not always consistent with what they believe should be, or can be, done (Fang, 1996; Basturkmen *et al.*, 2004). A number of factors have been suggested to explain the inconsistencies between the way teachers perceive things and the way they act:

a    *Contextual constraints*. Contextual variables may act as constraints on teacher actions, as they may prevent teachers from acting in the way they believe they should. Time limits, lack of appropriate teaching aids, the external 'pressure' of the curri-

culum, official school policy and the presence of too many students in the same class are just a few examples of such contextual constraints. The result may be practices or actions that teachers themselves are not completely satisfied with, because they fail to live up to their expectations, hopes and convictions.

b *Conflicting beliefs*. Since a teacher's actions are informed by a range of beliefs about teaching and education, it is inevitable that some of these beliefs are sometimes contradictory. In taking decisions with regard to actions in the classroom, teachers will sometimes have to make compromises, strike a workable balance or take actions that are consistent with some beliefs, yet inconsistent with others. For instance, even if teachers may theoretically support the notion that language learners learn to speak by speaking, and group work allows many learners opportunities to speak, these beliefs may clash with teachers' convictions that classes should be orderly and that noise is not conducive to learning. In this respect, Lampert (1985: 190) calls the teacher 'a dilemma manager, a broker of contradictory interests who builds a working identity that is constructively ambiguous'.

c *Conflicts between beliefs and skills*. Teachers may be convinced, on a theoretical level, of particular pedagogical approaches but lack the skills to put them into practice. For instance, teachers may acknowledge the benefit of allowing learners the initiative to solve problems for themselves, but lack the interactional skill to support learners in such a way that does not take all initiative out of the learner's hands.

Research into the exact relationship between teacher cognition and teacher actions aims to yield deeper insights into what 'drives' teachers to act in a particular way in the classroom. Obviously, this kind of research is highly relevant for teacher training. In general, teacher training (whether it be the pre-service training of students or the inservice training of experienced teachers) aims to influence teacher practice in an effort to allow teachers to develop their professional competence and/or raise the quality of education they provide. Training programmes that fail to tune into what 'drives' teacher actions will probably stand a smaller chance of success than programmes that take into account the many variables that have an impact on the decisions that teachers make and the resulting actions they take (Richards, 1998; Richards & Lockhart, 1994). In this respect, a number of empirical studies suggest that the impact of pre-service and inservice training often is quite limited. Many teachers appear to be resistant to external intrusion: to take professional

decisions they primarily rely on their own experiences in the classroom, either as a learner or as a teacher (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Lortie, 1975; Richards, 1998). Thus, it is not so much the educational training enjoyed by the teachers or the academic wisdom they are offered in inservice training or in educational journals, but what they have done and do in the classroom itself, and the meaning that they attach to these experiences, that constitute the backbone of what they think and believe about education. However, the research on the impact of teacher training allows no firm conclusions on whether it is training as such that fails to have an impact on teacher cognition and teacher practice, or whether the training programmes lacked specific features which meant that they failed to constitute powerful learning environments for the teachers involved.

In the next sections, I will review a number of empirical studies that have specifically tried to study the impact of training programmes on teacher cognition and teacher actions, qualitatively exploring which features were essential in this respect. Most of the studies I will discuss involved inservice training programmes aiming to introduce teachers to the rationale and practice of task-based language teaching.

## 2  Teach what you preach

An early study into the effectiveness of inservice training offered to Flemish language teachers (Peeters & Van den Branden, 1991, 1992) showed that many inservice trainers opted for the 'theoretical' path: teachers were informed about the rationale of a particular pedagogical approach and were then supposed to make the transfer from the theoretical knowledge acquired during the inservice training to concrete practice in the classroom by themselves.

This early study showed that, in order to stimulate teachers to acquire theoretical-professional knowledge, a combination of explicit teaching and demonstration was commonly used. Inservice trainers, most of whom were employed at universities and teacher training institutes, typically stood in front of their audience, presenting their personal views on (language) education. In many cases, the trainers illustrated their ideas with concrete examples from the few classrooms they were familiar with and demonstrated desired practice in the safe and controlled surroundings of the training institute. These programmes were mostly limited to one meeting of three hours and aimed primarily at convincing the participants of certain pedagogical ideas, or at the very least, opening their minds to them. This often gave rise to teachers exchanging practical hints with each other with

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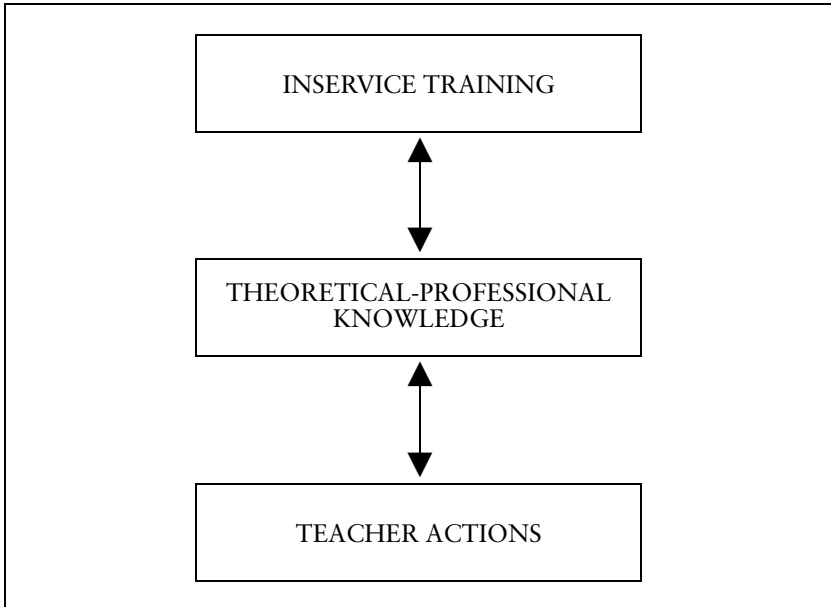
**Figure 3**  Inservice training influencing teacher perceptions and in turn, teacher actions

a view to implementing the new ideas in their classrooms, or to lively discussions where the perceptions of the teachers and inservice trainers clashed. Real training of target skills was seldom included in the programmes. This led to the strange paradox of inservice trainers adopting a theoretical approach in order to tell the participating teachers not to use a theoretical approach in their language class-rooms.

There is ample research, including Flemish research (Eisendrath, 2001; Peeters *et al.*, 1996), illustrating that teachers and student teachers are not completely satisfied with this kind of training. Teachers often complain that the training they receive is far too theoretical. Since theoretical expositions are characterized by a relatively high degree of abstraction, inservice trainers often build up a reputation of talking about 'different', 'ideal' or 'virtual' schools. This may give rise to exclamations like 'Try that with my students!' or 'Have you ever been to a real school in the centre of Brussels?' The more heterogeneous the participating group of teachers becomes, the more outspoken and numerous these remarks tend to become, especially when many participants get the feeling that they are all lumped together in the same category.

This feeling is further enhanced when, alongside the use of a theory-driven methodology, topic selection is dominated by the inservice trainer, rather than by the participants. In their research into inservice training provided to Flemish teachers of Dutch, Peeters & Van den Branden (1992) found that topic selection tended to be determined, in the first place, by the preferences and the expertise of the inservice trainers themselves. Very few inservice training institutes conducted needs analyses or tried to tune in their selection of topics and methods to the specific needs of their audience.

All this resulted in a low assessment by Flemish teachers of the extent to which the academic wisdom presented by the average inservice trainer could be of practical use in their classroom practice. Peeters & Van den Branden (1992) coined the term 'post-coursal depression': teachers return to their school from a training in rapture because the trainer was so eloquent and the ideas that were raised seemed so attractive, yet the next day they are back with their two feet on the ground when it turns out that putting these great ideas into practice is not straightforward and colleagues are not jumping about with enthusiasm either. In the end, this kind of inservice training may even have the opposite effect: the enthusiastic teacher does not do anything with the new ideas, and may even think twice before attending another training course in the future. In the long run, this may result in an increasing number of teachers no longer attending training unless they are obliged to do so by the headteacher, or into a growing aversion among teachers to any kind of educational innovation.

## 3  Combining inservice training and introduction of task-based courses

In this section, I will discuss a number of studies that report the impact of inservice training programmes in which the theoretical paradigm was replaced by a combination of syllabus introduction and theoretical background sessions.

### 3.1  Linsen's study

The first study I will review in this section was conducted by Linsen (1994). This study focused on the effects of a nationwide inservice training programme aiming to raise the quality of second language education of Dutch in primary schools in Flanders by introducing teachers to task-based language teaching. This inservice training

programme was set up by the Centre for Language and Education at the University of Leuven. The training programme was financed by the Flemish government out of a concern with the many Educational Priority Policy (EPP) schools that faced a growing influx of migrant pupils who acquired a language other than Dutch (the main medium of instruction in Flemish schools) as their mother tongue. On the basis of a literature survey and an extensive round of consultations with Flemish and Dutch experts, the Centre for Language and Education decided that task-based language teaching would probably be more suitable for stimulating low-SES (socio-economic status), non-native speaking children to build up Dutch academic language proficiency than the form-oriented, teacher-dominated language teaching methodologies that were common practice at that time.

Most of the inservice trainings were organized in central locations in Flanders (e.g. Leuven, Brussels). The participants were invited to come and participate in the training sessions there. The inservice training sessions were attended by one teacher (the so-called 'key person') per EPP school. In most schools, these were teachers who were granted class-free hours (through the EPP funding provided by the government) in order to build up expertise with regard to second language education and to transmit this expertise to their colleagues.

The potential success of this inservice training programme was further enhanced by the fact that a number of crucial conditions for the successful implementation of educational innovations (Ellis, 2003; Van Den Bergh & Vandenberghe, 1999) were met:

1  *Problem awareness*. The EPP schools were in dire need of support (Jaspaert, 1996a,b; Terkessidis & Van de Velde, 1991). Among most EPP school staff members, there was a strong awareness that the academic results of substantial groups of children, especially non-native speakers of Dutch, were very poor and that the language gap between the children's Dutch language proficiency and the academic language proficiency demanded by the school needed to be bridged. On the other hand, schools were very uncertain about how to tackle this delicate problem. As early EPP studies (Terkessidis & Van de Velde, 1991; 3; OVGB-evaluatieteam, 1997) showed, schools were very eager to accept any kind of support that was offered.

2  *External pressure*. Schools were not only motivated to seek support themselves, they were almost obliged to do so. The official Flemish government policy stipulated that EPP schools would only be granted additional funding if these were used to raise their quality of education. One of the actions the schools had to take,

and actually had to provide evidence of, was to stimulate their staff members to be supported by EPP educational counsellors and to receive training by expert institutes with regard to Dutch second language education.

3 *Support structure*. The Flemish government created an extra contingent of EPP school counsellors with the task of intensively supporting the schools in raising their quality of education. Simultaneously, the Centre for Language and Education (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven) was founded to also support EPP schools by providing inservice training on second language education, developing new syllabuses and conducting research. The EPP school counsellors, who operated close to the schools, were trained by the Centre for Language and Education: they quickly adopted the task-based rationale, and followed up the introduction of the task-based syllabuses that were developed by the Centre for Language and Education in the EPP schools. The official government policy also stimulated intensive exchanges between all EPP educational counsellors.

4 *Team building facilities*. Official EPP government policy further stipulated that part of the extra school funding had to be used to allow teachers 'class-free' hours. These hours were specifically oriented towards team building. In each EPP school, one EPP teacher (the 'key person') was assigned to stimulate team building, support the EPP target pupils, build up expertise and exchange it with the other team members. Reports issued by the Flemish EPP inspectorate showed that this aspect of the EPP policy was taken up particularly well by the EPP schools: many of the EPP school teams gradually developed a culture of joint deliberation and negotiation.

Aware of the potential drawbacks and limitations of offering inservice trainings in which only the theory of task-based language teaching would be transmitted, the Centre for Language and Education opted for an implementation strategy combining inservice training programmes with the introduction of task-based syllabuses, ready to be used and tried out in the classroom. The task-based syllabuses that the Centre developed were intended to be used by all interested teachers in the EPP schools. The key persons' tasks included following up the implementation of the syllabuses in their school and providing feedback to the Centre on how the syllabuses could be improved:

> Since the task-based pedagogy is so different from the currently used language teaching methods, EPP support

> structures have chosen to combine theoretical training of teachers with practice-oriented support. The latter happens through the introduction of suitable syllabuses. An exposition on the theoretical background (of TBLT) will not lead to change in teachers' classroom practice. Teachers need suitable syllabuses, and they cannot develop these themselves. On the other hand, one may expect that working with syllabuses that are developed along innovative principles will not lead to sufficient change in teachers' practices if the teacher does not have a profound insight in the theoretical and pedagogical rationale behind the activities. It is likely then, that 'new' syllabuses will be used 'the old way', and will miss their target. (Linsen, 1994: 138; my translation)

Linsen (1994) evaluated the introduction of TBLT in EPP primary schools between 1992 and 1994. She analysed 114 teacher logs, conducted 21 oral interviews with teachers and analysed classroom interaction through observations in 20 schools. The main research question her study addressed was: how do teachers respond to the task-based syllabuses and to the theory of task-based language education they are presented with (either by the key person, the school (educational) counsellor or the Centre)? This research question was further broken down into a number of subquestions:

1 Do teachers notice a difference between TBLT and their current pedagogical approach?
2 How do they handle the tasks in the syllabuses? How do they cope with features of the methodology that may be expected to differ from what they are used to in the classroom: (a) task difficulty (b) functional tasks (c) dealing with differences between pupils (d) pedagogical tasks, and (e) group work?
3 What is the general attitude of teachers towards TBLT?
4 To what extent have the teachers understood and incorporated the theory behind TBLT?

The majority of the teachers in Linsen's study noticed many differences between TBLT and their own approach. The main differences they noticed were in the kind of activities performed in the classroom (62 teachers), the kind of topics and themes covered (57), the kind of oral (53) and written input (41) provided, the methodological formats used (33), the type of syllabus used (28), the goals that are pursued (27), the learning activities performed by the pupils (25) and the grouping formats that are dominant (21). As the interviews and the classrooms observations indicated, these differences were prob-

lematic for many teachers. The main problems they experienced had to do with task complexity, maintaining control of what was going in the class, differentiating between pupils and handling group work.

The issue of task complexity has been particularly problematic for teachers. In Linsen's study, teachers often noted in their logs, that the reason for a task being unsuccessful in their classroom was that they thought the task too difficult for their students or pupils. According to the Flemish task-based rationale, tasks are supposed to be just above the level of the pupils' current language proficiency (see also Chapters 3 and 4 in this volume). In other words tasks should be challenging. Difficulties may lead to negotiation, stretch learners and extend their language resources and may also make instructive demands on their abilities to comprehend and produce new language. To a certain extent, tasks are designed to have learners run into cognitive or linguistic problems. This clearly differs from the traditional, 'linguistic' view on language teaching, in which the teacher presents a linguistic feature, makes sure that everybody has understood and then gives the learners exercises that they are all supposed to be able to do correctly. Linsen's logs, classroom observations and interviews illustrate that when teachers change the task-based activities they face, their main motive is to make them easier. When the teachers anticipate that their pupils will not be able to cope with the tasks, they simplify them. One way of doing this is by changing the task itself (for instance, by simplifying the vocabulary in a text or by asking the students to fill in only one word instead of writing complete sentences). Another way is to leave the task unchanged, but to adapt they way it is implemented. For instance, some teachers stretch the introduction phase by explaining all difficult words in a text before the students are allowed to read it.

## 3.2  Later implementation studies

Teachers struggling with the complexity of meaningful tasks is in fact a consistent pattern that has also been repeated in later empirical studies. For instance, in a recent study, Timmermans (2005) reports a qualitative study, including classroom observations and extensive interviews, into how ten teachers of the first year of primary school reacted to the introduction of a task-based syllabus aimed at giving early readers the chance to perform functional, motivating reading comprehension tasks. Timmermans concludes that when teachers manipulated the task-based activities they were given, their aim was to make the tasks easier or more accessible to the pupils. In this study, the teachers mainly manipulated the implementation of the

tasks. Apart from explaining words they believed would be difficult for the pupils, the teachers read aloud texts that were supposed to be individually read in silence by the children, because they feared that some pupils still lacked the technical reading proficiency to read the texts themselves.

Luyten & Houben (2002) and D'hondt (2004) report similar results in two field studies on the implementation of a task-based multimedia course of basic Dutch as a second language for adult non-native speakers (NNS) in Flanders (see also Chapter 6 in this volume). This course consists of two parts:

a *Multimedia soap*. The adult learners, individually or in pairs, sit behind a computer screen and watch a soap in which the characters are involved in all kinds of real-life situations. The learners are continually asked to interact with the programme by clicking the mouse, dragging icons to the right place, filling in forms, etc. The learner can only perform these tasks by comprehending the conversations. This part of the course offers learners a high degree of self-regulation and control over their own learning process since they move through it at their own pace.

b *Classroom periods*. These are organized in groups of about 10–15 learners. These periods take the language tasks in the multimedia soap as their starting point. The teacher confronts the students with speaking tasks and with further examples of tasks that were covered in the multimedia soap and also focuses on form.

Luyten and Houben's research indicates that the learners reacted very enthusiastically to this course. This was also noticed by the teachers, who emphasized that many learners refused to have a break because they wanted to go on with the multimedia soap and that in general the learners were very concentrated. The teachers' own reactions to the course, however, turned out to be more varied and disparate. Again, the complexity of the tasks turned out to be one of the main obstacles teachers brought up. For teachers who stuck to the idea that learners can only do functional, communicative things with language *after* they have acquired implicit or explicit knowledge of isolated linguistic elements such as words and grammar rules, presenting learners with complex, functional language tasks from the onset of a basic language course appeared to be hard to accept.

Of course, teachers' assessment of task difficulty is to a large degree a subjective matter. It is closely linked to their personal views on language education and attainment goals, and to their general expectations of what pupils at a certain age, or students at a certain level, will be able to do. In her study Linsen (1994) quotes a teacher

who concludes that a language lesson built up around a writing task was not a success because the texts that the pupils had written were full of spelling errors. Linsen's own interpretation of the same texts is that the pupils succeeded in writing communicatively adequate messages.

Teachers may have very precise and high demands in mind when it comes to pupils performing tasks: for instance, when performing writing tasks, learners should make no spelling errors, and when performing reading tasks, they should understand every single word in the text. These expectations, however, may not entirely match the task outcomes that were intended by the syllabus developer. Clearly, one of the main aspects in which TBLT differs from traditional, 'linguistic' approaches is the emphasis the former puts on functional, communicative adequacy rather than on correctness alone. Paradoxically, teachers who are concerned about the tasks in the task-based syllabus being too 'difficult' for their students, may be unaware of the fact that they themselves raise the difficulty level of the tasks by imposing unnatural, or excessive, demands on their students' language output.

Besides complexity, the issue of maintaining control over what happens in the classroom is crucial to many teachers. In fact, complexity and control are closely linked. From a psychological point of view, a pedagogical approach in which the teacher first presents certain linguistic features in a predetermined and logical order, and then evaluates whether exercises performed by the learners are correct according to clearly defined criteria, gives the teacher a high degree of control. This sense of control may be the perfect antidote for the uncertainty that teachers have to struggle with by definition. In a sense, one of the main challenges of the teaching profession is to deal with uncertainty. No matter what researchers, teacher trainers or educationalists may claim, there is no perfect match between teaching and learning. Education offers no guarantees. In order to cope with this unsettling truth, teachers must create for themselves a feeling of being able to control and direct learning, at least to a certain extent. They can do this by, for instance, making use of standardized tests, explicit methods and tightly organized curricula. One of the main attractions of 'linguistic' syllabuses lies in the psychological comfort they can give to teachers: by spelling out to the teacher in full detail what is to be taught in which particular order and what learners are supposed to do, say and learn, they belittle the unpredictability of the actual learning that is going on: what *should have been* learnt can be described in exact terms and can be assessed very precisely.

Conversely, confronting a class with a task that may or is even intended to result in as many different learning experiences as there are learners, depending on the specific problems each individual learner runs into, on the idiosyncratic task performance and learning process they go through and on the interaction learners engage in together, leaves the teacher wondering what exactly was learned. This feeling of uneasiness may even be aggravated to the extent that teachers are explicitly reminded, for instance by inservice trainers, of the fact that learning, in essence, is a mental process going on inside students' heads. In a number of Flemish field studies involving the implementation of syllabuses containing task-based reading activities (Duran, 1994; Timmermans & Van Eekelen, 1999; Timmermans *et al.*, 2000; Timmermans, 2005), some teachers were found to interrupt the pupils' silent reading constantly in order to check the latter's comprehension. Some teachers also changed tasks that were supposed to be performed individually by the learners to lockstep activities. The activities where teachers turned silent reading activities into listening activities by reading aloud the texts themselves can also be interpreted in terms of the teacher regaining control.

In their implementation study of the above-mentioned multimedia course for adult NNSs of Dutch, Luyten & Houben (2002: 15) conclude that teachers found the loss of control particularly troublesome in the time when the learners were working individually on computers with the multimedia soap:

> For teachers who were used to clearly describing the contents and structure of their lessons beforehand, the confrontation with the cd-rom was troublesome. ... They felt they had no control over the learning going on, while they used to believe they could make every single learner make steady progress at the same pace. For some teachers, this was the end of the line (i.e. they stopped working with the course). In some groups, a lot of time was devoted to synchronizing the learners' progress, by explicitly dealing with the input in the classroom. The fact that the characters in the soap talk quickly and use difficult syntactic structures, was disturbing for these teachers. ... Some were annoyed because the input included words that they believed were not part of elementary vocabulary at a basic level. Some teachers wanted spelt-out versions of the subtitling and vocabulary lists.          (my translation)

Teachers' striving for control can be linked to another aspect they find problematic about TBLT: the frequent use of group work. A number of Flemish implementation studies (Devlieger *et al.*, 2003;

Hillewaere, 2000; Linsen, 1994) reveal that many teachers do not like group work and only hesitatingly introduce it in their classrooms. Many arguments against group work tend to be given: the classroom becomes noisy and chaotic, the teacher loses control over what is happening in the groups, learners are suspected of idle talk and laziness, pupils of lower proficiency are said not to participate, pupils of a higher proficiency are assumed to dominate interaction or to do all the work. In the above-mentioned studies, the teachers who experienced these problems were found to try and compensate for their loss of control by converting group work into lockstep activities, and by turning task-based activities into explicit vocabulary training sessions. In her study, Linsen mentions that some teachers actually became quite suspicious of the students' enthusiasm with the task-based activities: if their students thought of the language lessons as playtime, they were left wondering whether any 'real' learning could actually result from all these games and riddles.

All this is also reflected in the way the teachers handle differences between students. In the inservice training the Centre offered, teachers were told to differentiate first of all in the way in which and the degree to which they interactionally support individual learners as they are performing a task. The inservice trainers place a strong emphasis on this way of differentiating, because of their strong awareness of the inherent dangers in task differentiation. Flemish studies of classroom interaction in the early 1990s (e.g. Van den Branden, 1995a,b), as well as the above-mentioned implementation studies, indicated that teachers' standard way of differentiating is by making tasks much easier for the pupils with a relatively low language proficiency. This, however, may often lead to oversimplification, exceedingly low teacher expectations and demands and, in this way, a sharp reduction in the tasks' educational potential.

All the above-mentioned patterns are further corroborated by Duran's research (1994) into the implementation of task-based syllabuses in Flemish secondary education, and by an implementation study conducted by Van Avermaet *et al*. (1994) with regard to adult education of Dutch as a second language. Duran observed six teachers in three different secondary schools, working with a new task-based syllabus. She observed a total of 57 classroom hours. Van Avermaet *et al*. (1994) conducted observations of task-based teaching in two schools for adult education and asked the teachers to evaluate the newly developed syllabuses. Both studies vividly illustrate that many teachers who are confronted with new methodologies that do not match their current teaching practices use various strategies to cope with the arising tensions. In Duran's study some teachers either

chose not to use the materials or to use them very selectively i.e. only running the activities that differed the least from their current practices; another commonly used strategy is to refashion the tasks in that direction. Van Avermaet *et al.* (1994: 216) give the following example:

> Starting from language use situations in which people ask each other what time it is, the language learners learn to tell the time in Dutch. One teacher saw this activity (in the task-based syllabus) as the perfect occasion for elaborating on the theme of clocks. Diverting from the materials, he gave the learners an exposé on different types of clocks: stopwatches, alarm clocks, cuckoo clocks, church bells, etc. All these different kinds of clocks were then categorized in various categories such as electronic clocks, mechanical clocks ...

## 3.3 Positive reactions to task-based syllabuses

Despite these obstacles and unintended outcomes, the balance of the implementation studies was not negative overall. Many teachers were found to react in a positive way to the fact that new syllabuses had been developed, and that, even if these materials did not meet all of their expectations, at least they freed them from one immense task: developing syllabuses themselves. In addition, the majority of the teachers were charmed by the students' enthusiasm: their motivation to perform the language tasks contributed to the teachers being motivated themselves to use the syllabuses. A number of teachers in primary and secondary education also saw a link between what the pupils were asked to do with language while performing the tasks and the kind of language tasks they were asked to perform across the curriculum. The sensitivity of these teachers to functional, communicative goals had clearly been raised.

Many of the studies also showed that teachers needed sufficient time to adapt their teaching practices: incorporation of task-based principles into daily classroom practice appeared to be a slow process. In general, the studies indicated that teachers do not like to throw everything they know overboard and replace it with something completely new. They prefer smooth transitions. This lends further empirical support to the complex relationship between teacher cognition and teacher actions. The basic argument supporting the use of syllabuses is that theoretical, declarative knowledge (knowing what TBLT is about) does not automatically result in procedural knowledge that teachers draw upon when taking action in the class. On the other hand, a theoretical basis is hypothesized to be necessary,

otherwise teachers will incorporate the new practice into their old ways. In other words, teachers will not adopt let alone integrate new practice if they do not believe in or have clear understanding of the rationale behind these new practices. And vice versa, new materials giving rise to new methods are prone to destabilize the teachers' practice. Even if they may be mechanically adopted, for these methods to be truly incorporated in the teachers' practice, they need to be integrated in the system of teacher cognition that drives teachers' actions.

In other words, educational innovation strategies need to address the practical and theoretical concerns that teachers have while adapting their classroom practice, preferably in an integrated way (Richards & Lockhart, 1994). With regard to task-based language education, some of these concerns go right to the heart of the teachers' educational and interactional style. For instance, teachers' reluctance to give students challenging tasks may be closely linked to their limited competence and willingness to flexibly adapt their teaching activities to the needs of individual learners, and with their reluctance to accept that student difficulties with understanding and speaking a foreign language can in fact be conducive to language learning, especially when these difficulties lead to negotiation of meaning, a focus on form, or to other forms of interaction. However, in order to enhance teachers' competence in these areas, it is clear that an implementation strategy combining theoretical training with the introduction of task-based syllabuses needs to be supplemented with more refined strategies that can offer teachers the problem-oriented, differentiated, interactional support they need.

## 4  School-based, practice-oriented coaching

In this section, I will report a recent longitudinal study into the implementation of task-based language education that was conducted in Brussels, the bilingual capital of Belgium: Dutch-medium primary schools in Brussels with a considerable percentage of NNS pupils were intensively supported by an expert team of school counsellors. The support programme was based on the following principles:

1 *School-based coaching*. Instead of teachers going to the inservice training centre to participate in the training, the inservice trainers and counsellors visited the school.
2 *Team-based coaching*. Rather than having one or two teachers per school team ('key persons') follow the inservice training programme and burdening these teachers with the task of transmitting

the acquired expertise to their colleagues, the intensive support addressed the whole school team. Coaching of individual members of the team alternated with whole-group meetings.

3 *Needs-based coaching*. Rather than offering a standard programme to the audience on predetermined topics, the intensive coaching was tuned to the specific needs of and questions from the school team.

4 *Practice-based coaching*. The intensive coaching was explicitly intended to avoid being theoretical or abstract, the coaching systematically took action in the classroom and in the school as its starting point. Moreover, the coaching sessions were also oriented towards new actions in the classroom.

These four principles were derived from the overarching principle that the learners, in this case the teachers and headteachers, are the active 'agents' in their own learning process. The coaching programme consisted of a number of meetings, spread over a relatively long period of time (one to three years, or even more), in which teacher activity in the classroom and reflection on these actions were continuously alternated. The content of coaching sessions were the result of intensive negotiation in which all parties were involved. Throughout the support programme, many different training strategies and methodological formats were utilized ( Joyce & Showers, 1998). Theory, demonstration, introduction of task-based syllabuses, training of skills, classroom observation and feedback were all part of the coaching programme.

Devlieger *et al*. (2003) carried out an evaluation study into the effects of the first three years of this intensive coaching programme in Brussels (2000–2). The study showed that the coaches visited each school about 20 times a year, with each individual teacher participating in three to five coaching sessions a year. Devlieger *et al*. (2003) based their research on three observation periods of nine weeks. They:

a observed the coaching interventions undertaken by the EPP school counsellors and members of the team;
b conducted classroom observations to establish what teachers actually did with the advice, the task-based syllabuses and feedback they were offered during the coaching sessions;
c interviewed the coaches, the teachers and the headteachers in order to analyse their perceptions.

Over the three data collection periods, they observed 170 coaching interventions, performed 21 classroom observations and conducted a total of 277 interviews. In the first phase of their research, they

focused on the effects of the coaching interventions on the teachers' perceptions and their reported practice in the classroom. In the second phase, they focused on the effects of the coaching interventions on the teachers' actual practice in the classroom. For this latter phase, they conducted a new round of classroom observations. In the third and final phase, they focused on the effects of the coaching interventions and the resulting implementation of TBLT on the learners' Dutch language proficiency.

The first phase of the research revealed that the teachers most appreciated the individual coaching sessions, especially those that accompanied the implementation of new syllabuses. These sessions either focused on preparing the teachers to work with particular activities from the syllabuses, or reflecting on a lesson in which the syllabus had been tried out. The Brussels teachers experienced this kind of coaching as a real support for their heavy job. First of all, this study corroborates that teachers strongly appreciate not having to develop syllabuses themselves. Devlieger *et al.* (2003) report that 50 per cent of the teachers were constantly on the lookout for better syllabuses and teaching aids. Frustrated with their pupils' disappointing results on Dutch language tests or feeling unable to deal with the immense range in the Dutch language proficiency of their pupils, they place a lot of hope in the introduction of new and suitable syllabuses. The Brussels EPP coaches offered task-based syllabuses, but these were not imposed. It was the school team's own choice to implement them or not.

In most of the schools, the task-based syllabuses offered by the coaches did not replace the older materials. Even though the older, 'linguistic' courses were found to address the pupils' language problems insufficiently and some of these courses were constructed along completely different pedagogical lines, most of the teachers in Brussels sought to reconcile the old system with the new one. They tried out the task-based activities for a couple of hours a week, while using their old syllabus for the rest of the periods. Quite typically, they stuck to the old syllabus for those aspects of language education that they believed were insufficiently covered in the task-based syllabus. For instance, teachers who attached great importance to explicit knowledge on grammar, to spelling drills or explicit strategy training, employed the older courses for these purposes. In the same vein, the new, task-based syllabuses were adapted to look more like the old approach. As a result, an eclectic pedagogical approach resulted. The Brussels EPP counsellors made the deliberate choice of allowing the teachers a considerable degree of freedom with regard to how and when they would make use of the task-based syllabuses,

and how and when they would apply the task-based principles. Teachers who strongly resisted the introduction of task-based language teaching were not forced to comply.

One striking effect of the introduction of the new task-based syllabuses was that even those teachers with completely different views on language teaching were stimulated to consciously reflect upon their actions in the classroom. The automatic pilot was temporarily switched off:

> There's a lot of talking now, mainly about these task-based syllabuses and so on. That became apparent during our staff meeting. ... It's not just reading the story they do, but they think about it, like, how am I going to do this, how am I going to get this across?'            (Interview with headteacher:
> Devlieger *et al*., 2003: 96; my translation)

Most headteachers did not mind that their teachers did not use the task-based syllabuses in exactly the way described by the coach or in the guidelines, or that the teachers were not fully convinced from the outset:

> From time to time, people (i.e. teachers) have doubts. But that is positive, I think. I mean, you shouldn't swallow everything that others say unthinkingly. Somebody comes up with a new gospel, you shouldn't believe everything he says. You should have your own opinion. They (the teachers) are occupied with this matter very consciously. And they are looking for new ideas themselves. You really notice that this has caused a lot of movement.   (Interview with headteacher:
> Devlieger *et al*., 2003: 96; my translation)

Teachers and headteachers emphasized that in the initial phase of syllabus introduction, it was of paramount importance that they received answers to the many questions they had. In this stage, they attached much importance to being followed up by their coach:

> You have a training, a meeting, you can try things out, and then there is another meeting, and then you can evaluate. I like that. Not too much, because then you can't cope anymore. Then it becomes an obligation, something you must do, and then it all comes to nothing. You need the space to make it work.                 (Interview with a teacher:
> Devlieger *et al*., 2003: 96; my translation)

As the quotation shows, for inservice trainers it is important to follow the lead and the pace of the teacher. For teachers it is crucial

that they are given the chance to try out new ideas in the classroom and see how they work out. This again stresses the primacy of practice-oriented inservice training: it must lead to things that teachers can *do* in their classrooms (tasks they can perform), and if this is the case, teachers have a great need to reflect upon that practice afterwards, either with the trainer/counsellor, with a colleague or with the headteacher.

This, then, was one of the main functions of the coaching sessions provided by the school counsellors and inservice trainers. The questions raised during these coaching sessions, which preceded and followed the actual try-out of the new activities in the classroom, ranged from very fundamental questions about the basic rationale behind TBLT to very concrete, almost trivial questions on practical issues (such as the time that certain phases of a task-based lesson should take, or how to physically rearrange the classroom, or clever ways to quickly distribute pictures). These practical issues and contextual constraints occupied teachers' minds very strongly, to such an extent that, if these were not solved, some teachers refrained from implementing the syllabus altogether, because they found it 'too much trouble'.

Coaching that started from concrete classroom actions inspired by concrete materials were appreciated so much by teachers because they stood so close to their own classroom practice: high-sounding principles such as stimulating pupils' initiative, differentiating between pupils, working with challenging and motivating tasks and negotiating meaning, could be translated into a very concrete, almost tactile level and become 'real'. In addition, specific problems that the individual teacher faced and that differed to a great extent from the questions and worries that other teachers had, were not ignored. All this gave the teachers a feeling of being taken seriously, and provided them with a sense of ownership:

> I really like it [i.e. the coaching] very much. Before we started, I really had a feeling like 'oh no! what is this going to be like', so I was rather sceptical, but my impressions have become far more positive. It is really great, very concrete, it can really be put to practice. I have followed 1,001 inservice training sessions on how to do something, and that is a lot of theory but you can't put it to practice, because you don't get any feedback afterwards, and there's nowhere to go with your questions, and this was really a great help to me.
>
> (Interview with a teacher:
> Devlieger *et al*., 2003: 43; my translation)

The Brussels EPP counsellors regarded the coaching sessions as crucial moments in which they slowly but surely tried to stimulate the teachers to further develop their professional competence. For them, the introduction of task-based syllabuses, and the coaching on the use of the materials, were means for getting teachers to reflect on many fundamental aspects of their language teaching (e.g. the goals they want to pursue, the topics they want to cover, the way they interact with the pupils, etc.) and to optimize their interactional style in the classroom. In this respect, the counsellors acknowledged that syllabus introduction has clear limitations as well. A focus on syllabuses gives the impression that a new syllabus itself can solve all the pupils' problems. If the syllabus is implemented in the 'right' way, then the pupils' Dutch language proficiency will grow, so the argument goes. The counsellors were aware of the dangers and inherent contradictions of this line of reasoning. There probably is no single 'right' way of using task-based materials. Devlieger *et al*.'s (2003) classroom observations reveal that if one and the same task-based activity, taken from the same syllabus, is performed in three different classes, three different lessons arise. This, in fact, is the intended outcome of the coaching: it is not the task in itself, but the interaction and mental activity developed by the students and the teacher that will eventually determine how much, and what language, will be learnt. Tasks are merely blueprints, they are not intended to and cannot be complete scripts for language learning (Coughlan & Duff, 1994; see also Chapter 8 in this volume).

This last point emphasizes the importance of another training method that some EPP counsellors often used i.e. classroom observation and feedback. The counsellors stressed that the basic idea of these classroom observations was not to control or inspect the teachers, but to pave the way for a constructive 'knowledge-transforming' (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987) dialogue between the teacher and the observer. Classroom observations were never imposed on teachers, but only conducted with their full consent. The counsellors conducted non-participating observations: seated in the back of the classroom, they observed and took notes on what was going on. In a limited number of cases the lesson was videotaped.

Shortly after the observed activity, a meeting was set up between the teacher and his coach, in which the former was invited to reflect upon the learners', and his own, actions, during the lesson that was observed. Through asking questions, the coach tried to stimulate the teacher into unravelling the mental forces and 'drives' behind the actions he took. The coach's aim with this session was to complete a

cycle of reflection (based on Korthagen, 1999a,b), which comprises the following stages:

1 action in real operating conditions (lesson activity) + observation of the action;
2 reflection by looking back on the action;
3 becoming aware of crucial features of the action on a more abstract level (by linking with earlier experience and theoretical or more general frameworks);
4 designing possible alternatives for future action;
5 experimenting with the alternatives in real operating conditions.

The main aim of the coach was not to convince the teachers of certain 'task-based' truths, but rather to help the teachers to discover their own truth. The trainers' aim was to set in motion a train of thought which would enable the teachers to ascertain for themselves the strengths and weaknesses of the learning environments they had constructed together with their pupils, and to come up with alternatives for areas that merited further attention. Similar to the way focus on form is inserted in meaningful task-based activities at the moment a particular problem is experienced or signalled by the learner, the EPP coaches tried to make their own pedagogical views explicit only when the observed teacher, inspired by a particular problem or question, requested it. The interviews with the teachers clearly showed that the latter expected the coach not only to ask intelligent questions, but also to 'give answers to their questions', 'demonstrate how particular lessons should be given', and 'make explicit concrete working points for the teacher' (Devlieger *et al.*, 2003).

In a number of cases, the classroom observation and feedback sessions appeared to have a direct effect on teacher actions. Devlieger *et al.* (2003) report a number of instances in which a working point made explicit during the feedback session was taken up by the teacher in the next activity. Furthermore, many of the teachers who were involved in these sessions voiced their strong appreciation for this type of coaching.

## 5  The importance of contextual conditions

All of the above-mentioned research studies in which Flemish and Brussels language teachers were interviewed about their evaluation of inservice training aiming to stimulate educational innovation, emphasize the teachers' acute sensitivity to contextual conditions. If these are insufficiently taken into account by the inservice trainer or school counsellor, chances of new ideas being accepted and adopted almost

inevitably become smaller. To put it negatively, teachers often use bad contextual conditions as reasons explaining why they are not more open to the pedagogical ideas raised by the inservice trainer.

Contextual conditions can be subdivided into different categories such as those pertaining to:

a  the organization of the inservice training programme itself;
b  the implementation of the content of the inservice training pro-
   gramme;
c  the educational policy in which the inservice training programme
   is embedded;
d  the broad societal context in which the programme is embedded.

In interviews with teachers, the first category is prominent. Teachers are particularly sensitive to the spatial and temporal conditions under which they are asked to follow inservice training programmes. Inservice training programmes are ideally run during teachers' official working hours. If inservice training programmes are organized after school hours, on free afternoons, or late in the evening, teachers experience them as an extra burden in an already demanding job:

> In the beginning, teachers were suspicious, as if they wanted to say 'we are not going to have many more meetings, are we?' But what they mean is, 'after class hours'. Because they all have their families and their children. But up to now, it has been very good that the training sessions have been organized during class hours. So I can see no reason why we should not continue. I don't find it an extra load on people.
>
> (Interview with headteacher:
> Devlieger *et al*., 2003: 41; my translation)

> I think it's positive that it happens during class hours. I mean, it makes the job more fun, I mean, it's not always in the classroom. I think it's a good thing for us. ... On the other hand, we have to find a better system to organize things better or, like they say, have an extra teacher to work with our pupils in the meantime ...     (Interview with a teacher:
> Devlieger *et al*., 2003: 41–2; my translation)

Teachers prefer to have inservice training in their own school. Peeters & Van den Branden's (1991, 1992) studies showed that when Flemish teachers follow inservice training programmes, they have high expectations of their working conditions: the room has to be spacious, warm and have good acoustics, technological aids such as video, projector and overhead projector have to work properly, the location must be easy to reach, coffee breaks are a must.

Teachers have high expectations not only with regard to their physical environment but also regarding the support, feedback and materials they are given as part of their inservice training. Thus, they appreciate the opportunity of being able to exchange views with their colleagues and trainers and having follow-up sessions with their trainers after they have tried out something from the new syllabus. In their handbooks on teacher training, Joyce & Showers (1988) and Richards & Lockhart (1994) emphasize the potential benefits of teachers working together and observing each other in their classrooms. As the quotation below testifies, teachers can also act as excellent coaches for each other partly because they have had similar experiences, worries or problems. Two teachers potentially have more experience and ideas than one, and it is likely that teachers are going to be more open to the ideas and advice they receive from colleagues than to those coming from an external inservice trainer not least because their colleagues' ideas have stood the test of classroom practice (in the very same school). Furthermore, if teachers of the same school can visit each other's classrooms, their co-operation may lead to more coherent school language policies: 'I love working together with other teachers because you have more ideas, you know much better what to do and what not to do, what to stick to, at what level the children are, where you should tune in. I think it's going to happen more and more in the future'. (Interview with a teacher: Devlieger *et al*., 2003: 43; my translation).

In Flemish EPP schools, teachers were encouraged and motivated to team-teach from the mid-1990s onwards. Rather than pulling pupils of low proficiency out of the class to give them special Dutch as a second language courses, teachers were encouraged to enter a colleague's class and participate as the 'second teacher'. This made it more possible for the teachers to support more students or groups of students during the task-performance phase, and to give them the kind of support that addressed their particular needs. The second teacher was also often asked to observe children while they were performing tasks to find out what particular problems they ran into, in order to deal with these at an early stage. Research shows that this system of team-teaching has now been widely implemented in Flemish primary education (Hillewaere, 2000). Teachers find it stimulating to prepare their lessons together, it gives them the opportunity of seeing each other 'in action' in the classroom and of discussing activities afterwards. For teachers, this offers many opportunities to learn about themselves as teachers and to learn from each other.

School-based inservice training can also involve the whole school team. However, rather than giving the team a theoretical exposition

on 'focus on form' or 'task-based reading education', the team can be given a task. For instance, for teams still working with very old language syllabuses and complaining that they cannot offer functional writing tasks to their students, inservice training sessions can be converted to workshops during which the school team develops these kinds of tasks. The school team members work together in groups, receive feedback on their work from the inservice trainer, try out the activities they have developed in the classroom, exchange their experiences during the following meeting, and then draw up the final draft of the writing tasks. School teams can also be invited to visit another school and observe classes there in order to share experiences later. School teams can also be asked to watch video recordings of task-based lessons and discuss whether or not they would run the activities the same way. The main idea behind all such training sessions is not that a single truth shall emerge from them, but that different members of the same school team can learn more about each other's views on language education. They can learn while discussing and negotiating, and while developing, thinking and acting as a team. For some teachers, team building may actually be more important than the potential cognitive benefits of such sessions:

Interviewer: So team training is useful?
Teacher:     Yes, certainly, but not so much to acquire knowledge for myself, but for team building, yes, that's it. Eating cakes together.

(Devlieger *et al.*, 2003: 44)

Flemish research into 'effective schools' (Rymenans *et al.*, 1996; De Maeyer & Rymenans, 2004), and into the implementation of educational innovations across the curriculum (Van den Bergh and Vandenberghe, 1999), highlights the crucial role that headteachers play in this respect. Teachers are particularly sensitive to headteachers' support for the implementation of new pedagogical innovations, both psychologically (e.g. by encouraging teachers to try out new ideas, by coaching them, by listening to their worries, problems and needs), and from an organizational perspective (e.g. by passing on information, by facilitating team-teaching, organizing inservice training and coaching programmes, financing the purchase of new materials, etc.). Headteachers can also make sure that detailed planning for innovation programmes is formulated and adhered to. The implementation of educational innovations very often dies a slow death, because no decisions are taken as to 'who in the team will do what at a given moment?' Since 2002, Flemish EPP schools have embarked on implementation cycles of three years. Each cycle starts with a thorough analysis, conducted by the whole school team of the

state of the school with regard to the quality of education it is offering. Out of this analysis, domains of priority are chosen by the school team, and concrete actions for raising the quality of education in these domains are described. One of the domains they have to scrutinize is language education: guided by a set of inspiring questions, school teams analyse what their strengths and weaknesses are with regard to school language policy, and from this analysis, they decide upon a number of actions they believe have to be taken in order to raise the quality of their language education. The coaching provided by the school counsellor, inservice training centre or other external party, is then matched with this action programme. The coach acts as a guide to inspire, stimulate and support the school team to carry out the chosen actions. After the first year, the EPP school conducts a self-assessment of the degree to which their action plan has been carried out, and considers what adjustments need to be made. In the third year, the school is visited by the Flemish inspectorate for an external assessment of the execution of the EPP plan. A positive evaluation is necessary for the school to be allowed to apply for new grants during the following three-year cycle. This illustrates that even at the level of regional educational language policy, Flemish EPP schools are encouraged to improve the quality of their education, and to continuously assess what the value of educational innovations such as the implementation of task-based (language) teaching may be.

## 6  Evaluating support programmes

On the whole, after 13 years, the implementation of task-based language education in Flemish education, as described in the previous paragraphs, has been a success, especially in primary education. This is empirically borne out in Hillewaere's (2000) evaluation study of the effects of the Flemish government's EPP policy. Her main research question investigated the extent to which the quality of education was improved as a consequence of the Flemish government's support. To answer this question, she conducted classroom observations and interviews with teachers and headteachers in 20 schools; concurrently, language proficiency and arithmetic tests were given to the students. One of Hillewaere's main conclusions is that the EPP policy has been particularly successful with regard to language education. In comparison with other target domains of the EPP policy (intercultural education, prevention of learning problems/remedial teaching, communication with parents), language education shows the strongest effects in terms of implementing educational inno-

vation, both with regard to teacher perceptions and teacher actions in the classroom. The implementation strategy, combining the introduction of materials with regionwide inservice training and school-based intensive coaching, has been very fruitful. Again, Hillewaere's research shows that the implementation of task-based language teaching has not been a matter of 'all or nothing'. Teachers incorporating the task-based philosophy and working with task-based materials, did not abandon their old classroom practices altogether, but created their own personal blend with which they felt comfortable, found practicable and personally believed would have the greatest learning effects.

This is also corroborated in Devlieger & Goossens' (2004) second stage of their implementation study, focusing on the effects of the Brussels EPP support for teachers' classroom practice. Comparing teachers' actions in the classroom with the same teachers' classroom practice at the beginning of the implementation programme three years earlier, the main changes these researchers found were:

1 *Stronger orientation towards functional language goals.* One of the features of classroom practice that has been affected the most by the support programme is the functionality of goals that are pursued by the teacher during language-related activities. In the Brussels EPP schools, language activities are now far more geared towards functional language skills, than to the teaching of isolated linguistic elements (such as words and syntactic structures) or linguistic correctness. Tasks are predominantly seen and used in classrooms as tools to stimulate learners to engage in meaningful language use activities. The extent to which words, strategies and rules are blindly drilled has decreased. The task-based syllabuses that were introduced clearly had a positive impact on this aspect of language education.

2 *Higher quality of the teacher's input.* In comparison with the teacher's input at the beginning of the implementation period, the teachers' input has become more natural and functional. The type of questions the teachers ask provide more room for the children to freely develop their own thoughts and express their own experiences and opinions. Again, there is a link with the use of task-based materials, but the effect is stronger among teachers who were also supported through classroom observation and feedback.

3 *A higher level of involvement and motivation among pupils.* The pupils find the new task-based syllabuses much more attractive and more fun than the older materials. The activities in the

syllabuses that are introduced trigger learner activity and initiative, and are close(r) to the children's personal experiences outside the school.

4  *Lack of transfer.* The above-mentioned effects are more evident in activities that directly relate to topics that were dealt with in the EPP training and coaching sessions than in other activities. In other words, there is as yet no transfer effect of the Brussels EPP support to the rest of the curriculum.

5  *A more functional arrangement of the classroom.* Following the advice of the Brussels EPP counsellors, the teachers have re-organized their classrooms, and have introduced book corners, in which reading materials, headphones and cassette recorders are at the children's disposal.

6  *Effects of guided implementation of syllabuses.* Syllabuses that are introduced without guidance and follow-up by the EPP counsellor have only a limited effect on teachers' actions in the classroom. On the other hand, when teachers have the opportunity to prepare lessons from the syllabus together with the counsellor, to reflect together on the use of the syllabus after lessons have been given, or to be observed while trying out activities and receive feedback, the effects are much stronger. The research also shows that effects do not immediately become apparent, but that teachers need a certain amount of (guided) time to get used to the new syllabus.

7  *Lack of effect on methodological formats.* Despite the coaching and introduction of new syllabuses, Brussels EPP teachers remain reluctant to introduce group work. They clearly prefer individual tasks or lockstep activities.

8  *Need for control.* Teachers remain sensitive about who exerts control over what happens in the classroom. They adopt the task-based principles to the extent that they can still maintain control themselves. Clearly indicative of this tendency, EPP coaching goals have not been reached with regard to stimulating children to try and solve problems they meet during task performance themselves, stimulating interaction among peers, and creating more chances for children to produce extensive stretches of language output.

9  *Effects of needs-based coaching.* Teachers adopt the principles and ideas offered by the Brussels EPP to the extent that they believe this constitutes a relevant answer to the specific questions and needs they have. For instance, for teachers who claim they experience no need to change their classroom practices or for those who have widely differing views on language teaching methodology the EPP support has little effect.

It should be stressed that these research results pertain to effects in the short term. After all, the Brussels EPP support programme has only been running for three years. The teachers whose classroom practice has already been affected, probably can be categorized as 'early adopters' (Markee, 1997) of the task-based innovation. Time will tell whether or not these teachers are the forerunners of a greater implementation of the task-based principles in the Brussels Dutch-medium schools.

Another feature of language education that has changed in Flanders as a result of the EPP and the introduction of task-based language teaching, has to do with the mixing of students into heterogeneous groups (Hillewaere, 2000; Van den Branden, 2003): the majority of teachers have abandoned the practice of system-atically separating pupils of a lower proficiency from the rest of the group, in order to give them special teaching of Dutch as a second language. They have become aware of the risks of exclusively relying on task simplification, and of the affective and cognitive potential of working with heterogeneous groups. Many of them have developed the expertise to negotiate meaning with and interactionally support individual learners, and in doing so to cater for their particular needs (Jaspaert & Linsen, 1997). On the other hand, in their classroom practices, Flemish teachers, still seem to be reluctant to systematically introduce group work: many teachers continue to find group work hard to organize, and claim that it leads to chaos and noise, and deprives the teacher of a minimum sense of control in order to feel safe or 'in charge'. So as to comply with the principles of learner activity and initiative that most Flemish teachers and student-teachers now strongly endorse, and as demonstrated by a recent survey conducted by Van den Branden (2003), teachers make ample use of pair and individual work instead.

Jaspaert & Linsen's (1997) study into the effects of the imple-mentation of task-based language teaching on the students' language proficiency involving classroom observations and test administrations in 20 primary schools found a strong relationship between the extent to which the teachers of an EPP school appealed to the learners' initiative during language lessons, and the learners' level of Dutch language proficiency. Evidence of the effects of changed teacher practices on language learning were also found in the Brussels EPP experiment. Devlieger & Goossens (2004) report a pre-test–post-test study, in which the pupils' Dutch language proficiency was measured before the inservice training programme on task-based language education was begun, and at the end of the third implementation year through the use of standardized Dutch language tests. Significant

gains in Dutch language proficiency were found at the level of kinder-garten and primary education. These gains were found to be more substantial than the gains made by pupils in Flemish schools with a similar school population that were less intensively supported.

# 7 Conclusions

On the whole, the above-mentioned research studies show that regionwide, ambitious educational innovations can only succeed if sustained efforts are made: task-based language teaching takes a number of years to become fully incorporated in school practice. Furthermore, the incorporation will have better chances of success if the many different partners, who can potentially act as supportive agents for school teams (e.g. school counsellors, syllabus developers, inservice trainers, school inspectors, and educational policy makers) operate along agreed principles, and have the means and the com-petence to intensively coach and train the school teams that are involved.

In turn, these various partners will only be prepared to support the educational innovation if each of them can find their own 'truth', and their own 'worth', in the innovative concepts. This is exactly what 'task-based language teaching' in Flanders and Brussels has been able to achieve. For teachers, in search of suitable methods and syllabuses to cope with their low socio-economic status NNS pupils' dis-appointing academic results, task-based teaching was welcomed as a means to motivate their pupils for school work again, and to raise their functional, academic Dutch language proficiency. For teacher trainers, headteachers, school counsellors and educationalists, task-based teaching was a clear and coherent translation (alongside other techniques such as 'experience-based teaching') of the fundamental turn that, in their view, had to be taken by Flemish education towards more learner-centred and needs-based education. For educa-tional policy makers, task-based language teaching could be concep-tualized as a direct path leading to functional language performance, which in turn might lead to increased participation in society and in education. In the end, the strength of task-based language education in Flanders has been its multidimensional character: it has been far more than a pedagogical concept related to language education, but has been conceived as a powerful tool with which to emancipate learners from deprived backgrounds and underprivileged citizens in society. As such, the implementation of task-based language edu-cation has gradually developed into one of the emblems symbolizing the fight against social inequity in Flemish society.

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249

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# Subject Index

# Name Index