Task-based Language Teaching

Introduction

In 1976, Wilkins distinguished between two types of syllabi—**synthetic syllabi** and **analytic syllabi**. Synthetic syllabi comprise linguistic units: grammar structures, vocabulary items, functions, etc. The units are usually ordered logically, in a sequence from linguistic simplicity to linguistic complexity. It is the learners' responsibility to synthesize the linguistic units for the purpose of communication. Analytic syllabi, on the other hand, '… are organised in terms of the purposes for which people are learning language and the kinds of language performance that are necessary to meet those purposes' (Wilkins 1976: 13). Content-based instruction, which we looked at in the previous chapter, employs an analytic syllabus. Rather than learning language items one by one in a specific sequence, learners work on relevant content texts and the language of the texts. Second language acquisition (SLA) research supports the use of analytic syllabi because such research shows that learners do not learn linguistic items one at a time. Instead, they induce linguistic information from the language samples they work on, and they acquire language items only when they are ready to do so. A task-based syllabus, which we take up in this chapter, falls into the category of an analytic syllabus. The syllabus is composed of tasks, not a sequence of linguistic items.

Tasks are meaningful, and in doing them, students need to communicate. Tasks have a clear outcome so that the teacher and students know whether or not the communication has been successful. An example of a task in a task-based syllabus is for students to plan an itinerary for a trip. Students work in small groups with a train schedule. They are given certain destinations to include, and they have to decide on the most direct route to travel by train—the one that will take the least amount of travel time. As the students seek to complete the task, they have to work to understand each other and to express their own thoughts. By so doing, they have to check to see if they have comprehended correctly and, at times, they have to seek clarification.

This interaction and checking is thought to facilitate language acquisition (Long 1996; Gass 1997). As Candlin and Murphy note:

> The central purpose we are concerned with is language learning, and tasks present this in the form of a problem-solving negotiation between knowledge that the learner holds and new knowledge.
>
> (Candlin and Murphy 1987:1)

Task-based Language Teaching is another example of the 'strong version' of the communicative approach, where language is acquired through use. In other words, students acquire the language they need when they need it in order to accomplish the task that has been set before them.

Before proceeding to the lesson, following Ellis (2009) we should point out that there is a difference between task-based syllabi and task-based language teaching or TBLT. Task-based syllabi have been criticized for the absence of grammatical items (Sheen 2003; Swan 2005). While it may be true that task-based syllabi, being analytic in nature, do not expressly feature grammar structures, task-based teaching or **task-supported teaching** (Ellis 2003), in the minds of some methodologists, does not exclude it. For instance, Loschky and Bley-Vroman (1993) see value in engaging students in structure-based communicative tasks, which are designed to have students automatize the use of a structure that they have already internalized. A structure-based communicative task might involve making inferences about the identity of someone whose briefcase has been left in the back of a taxi (Riggenbach, Samuda, and Wisniewska 2007). Completing such a task by identifying the owner is likely to necessitate the use of certain modal verbs and/or adverbs of probability ('It might be a woman.' 'She is probably a businesswoman.').

Other methodologists claim that along with communicative tasks, there can be focused tasks that do not call for speaking, but instead, are designed to raise learners' consciousness with regard to specific linguistic items (Ellis 2009). For instance, students might be asked to trace a path on a map of a town, following directions given by the teacher. In this way, students would receive comprehensible input involving imperatives, prepositions of location and direction, and the names of different buildings. Other communicative tasks can be designed in such a way that they encourage students to notice a particular target language feature, possibly by means of **input enhancement**, such as using boldface type for a particular structure in a reading passage or **input flooding**, which means using particular vocabulary items or grammar structures with great frequency in the input. Such input enhancement techniques are thought to work well for structures that are not easily perceived, such as grammatical morphemes.

Then, too, Ellis (2003) suggests that there are a number of ways in which grammar can be addressed as a follow-up to a communicative task, includ-

ing direct explicit instruction and traditional practice-type exercises. Willis (1996) has also proposed a variety of such options for the post-task phase. Still others, while rejecting a role for such direct explicit instruction, claim that even within communicative tasks, some attention should be paid to linguistic form, through a **focus on form**, not a return to grammar drills and exercises, which is termed a focus on forms (Long 1991). A focus on form might involve a teacher's reformulating or recasting a student's error or providing a brief grammar explanation. It is said that focusing student attention on grammatical form in these ways can have a positive effect, provided that such attention is brief and reactive, in that it takes place when problems of grammatical inaccuracy arise (Long 2009).

Samuda and Bygate (2008) reach back into history even further than SLA research to find theoretical support for task-based language teaching. They do so citing the work of John Dewey (1913), who emphasized the need for experience, relevance, and 'intelligent effort' for effective learning. Dewey is generally considered to be the founder of **constructivism**. He rejected approaches that viewed learners as receptacles of the teacher's knowledge and favored ones where students are actively involved in constructing their own knowledge through experience and problem solving. Let us see how this plays out in our lesson.

Experience

The following lesson is one that has been adapted and expanded from Prabhu (1987). It takes place in southern India. The class consists of forty 10-year-old children, who are advanced beginners in English. As we enter the classroom, the teacher is speaking:

'We are going to do a lesson today on timetables. OK?'

The teacher draws the columns and rows of a class timetable on the whiteboard. At the head of the first column, he writes 9:30–10:15. The students understand that the teacher has written the duration of the first class period of the day.

'What should I write here?' asks the teacher, pointing to the head of the second column. The students respond, 'Ten fifteen.' And then 'Eleven o'clock,' as the teacher moves his finger across the top row. The teacher points in turn to the top of each column, and the students chorus the time that each class period begins and ends.

Then the teacher asks: 'Who will write the names for the days of the week here?' Several students raise their hands. The teacher calls on one. 'Come,' he says. The student he has called on comes to the front of the room, takes the

marker, and writes the names of each weekday beside each row, Monday to Friday, correctly, as the rest of the class helps with the spelling.

'Is that correct?' the teacher asks. 'Correct!' the students chorus back.

'What about Saturday? Do we have school on Saturday?'

The students reply in unison, 'No … weekend.'

The teacher responds, 'Yes. Saturday is on the weekend. Saturday's a weekend day.'

Next, the teacher has the students copy the blank schedule from the board. As he talks, each student fills in the schedule. He tells them, 'On Monday, you study English during the first period. How many of you like to study English?' Most hands go up in response. Then, he says, 'I guess that English is your favorite period, second only to lunch.' The students laugh. The teacher goes on, 'You also study English on Wednesday and Friday, first period. During the second period on these days, you study math.' The teacher continues until the schedules are completed. Students check each other's work.

The teacher then divides the class into eight groups of five students. Each student in a group receives the schedule for one day of the school week. The students' task is to complete the week's schedule by sharing the information on their cards with each other. There is much discussion as each group works to draw up a full schedule.

As he circulates among the groups, the teacher hears students making errors. He does not say anything, but he notes them and continues around the classroom. As he moves about the room listening to the groups, the teacher reminds the students to speak in English.

The first group that is finished comes up to the board and writes up the schedule. After the students have checked their work, the teacher collects each group's schedule so he can read it and return it to them the next day. He checks their schedules mainly to see that the content is correct.

Next, still working in their groups, the students are told that they are to find a way to determine their classmates' favorite school subjects. They must find out from class members which are the three most popular subjects and the three least popular. Each group is to discuss ways it might gather the information. The group might design a survey, for instance, or go around the room interviewing other students. After they have completed their survey or interviews, the groups have to summarize and report the results. They have to decide how to do this. For example, they may use percentages, a bar graph, a pie chart, or some other visual display. Once again, much conversation takes place. Students are busily talking about how they will obtain the information they need to complete the task and later to report their findings.
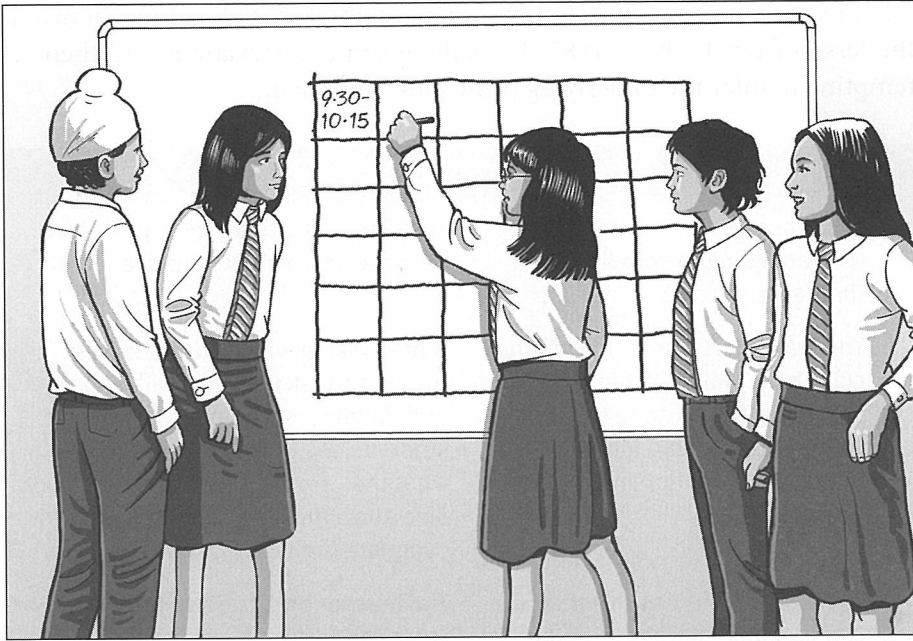
Figure 11.1   Students completing a schedule on the board

These will have to wait for another day to report, though, because there is no time left today. In the following period, the teacher will give them another task, where he will do the talking and the students will listen and do something. The input task the teacher has chosen takes into account what errors he has noted and written down in today's class.

Thinking about the Experience

We have seen that tasks are also used in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), so at first glance this short lesson may not seem so different. But notice that while the task in our CLT lesson in Chapter 9 was designed to get students to practice making predictions (a communicative function), the task-based lesson we have just observed did not focus on a particular function, or even a particular form of the language. In fact, the teacher used a wide variety of linguistic forms, the meaning of which was made clear by the context. The 'departure from CLT [in such lessons] … lay not in the tasks themselves, but in the accompanying pedagogic focus on task completion instead of on the language used in the process' (Long and Crookes 1993: 31). This is a major shift of perspective.

Let us compile the principles underlying the task-based method shown in the lesson from Prabhu (1987) by making some observations and then attempting to infer the underlying principles from them.

Observations	Principles
1 The teacher tells the class that they are going to complete a timetable.	The class activities have a perceived purpose and a clear outcome.
2 The teacher begins by having the class help him to fill out a class schedule. This is done through whole class interaction in the form of teacher question and student response.	A pre-task, in which students work through a task that they will later do individually, is a helpful way to have students see the logic involved in what they are being asked to do. It will also allow the language necessary to complete the task to come into play.
3 The teacher first has the students label the time periods and then the days.	The teacher breaks down into smaller steps the logical thinking process necessary to complete the task. The demand on thinking made by the activity should be just above the level which learners can meet without help.
4 The teacher asks the students if a particular answer is right.	The teacher needs to seek ways of knowing how involved the students are in the process, so he can make adjustments in light of the learners' perceptions of relevance and their readiness to learn. Such teacher–class negotiation ensures that as many students as possible in a mixed-ability class grasp the nature of the activity.
5 The teacher asks, 'What about Saturday? Do we have school on Saturday?'	The teacher doesn't consciously simplify his language; he uses whatever language is necessary to have students comprehend the current step in the pre-task. Here he switched from an abbreviated *Wh*-question to a *yes/no* question. This switch is a natural strategy that proficient speakers use when interacting with less proficient speakers inside and outside of the classroom.

6 The students reply, 'Weekend.' The teacher responds, 'Yes. Saturday is on the weekend. Saturday's a weekend day.'	The teacher supplies the correct target form by reformulating or recasting what the students have said.
7 The teacher talks about the schedule.	The teacher provides good models of the target language.
8 The students then do the task in groups, following the teacher's instructions. They are each given some of the information they need to complete the task.	This jigsaw task, where students have to piece together information they need to complete a task, gives them an opportunity for interaction.
9 They make errors. The teacher notes them.	The teacher should not necessarily interrupt the students when they are focused on meaning.
10 The students' papers were marked for content.	Students should receive feedback on their level of success in completing the task. The need to achieve an outcome makes students pay attention.
11 Students are asked to design a way to survey the other students about their favorite and least favorite subjects. They are to figure out a way to report their findings to the rest of the class.	Students have input into the design and the way that they carry out the task. This gives them more opportunity for interaction.
12 Students report in the next class.	A public presentation encourages students to work on accuracy and organization, as well as meaning.
13 In their reports, students use the language they have been working on.	Repeating the language that they have been working on shows learners what they can and what they cannot yet do.
14 The teacher prepares a new task based on the errors he has noted.	'Listen-and-do' tasks promote acquisition of new vocabulary and provide a good model for grammatical form. This task follow-up can enhance the learning that has taken place earlier.

Reviewing the Principles

We will now follow our customary procedure and review the answers to our 10 questions.

1 What are the goals of teachers who use TBLT?

The goal of teachers is to facilitate students' language learning by engaging them in a variety of tasks that have a clear outcome.

2 What is the role of the teacher? What is the role of the students?

The teacher's role is to choose tasks, based on an analysis of students' needs, that are appropriate to the level of the students and to create pre-task and task follow-up phases that are in line with the abilities and needs of the students. The teacher also monitors the students' performance, and intervenes as necessary. The role of the students is to communicate with their peers to complete a task.

3 What are some characteristics of the teaching/learning process?

A pre-task phase typically begins a task sequence. During this phase, a teacher can introduce the students to the language they will need to complete the task. The tasks are meaningful and relevant so that the students see the reason for doing the task and can see how the task relates to possible situations in their lives outside the classroom. Students are actively engaged with the task, with the teacher monitoring their performance and intervening when necessary. The task has clear outcomes so that both students and teachers can tell if the task has been successfully completed. A post-task phase takes place to reinforce students' learning or to address any problems that may have arisen.

4 What is the nature of student–teacher interaction? What is the nature of student–student interaction?

The teacher is the input provider during the initial phase of the lesson. He also sets the task for students to perform. The teacher pays attention during the task, making note of language that should be focused on. He provides feedback such as recasts. Students often work closely together to help each other accomplish the task and to problem-solve.

5 How are the feelings of the students dealt with?

Students are motivated by doing tasks that prepare them for the real world.

6 How is the language viewed? How is culture viewed?

Language is for communicating and for 'doing.' Culture is not explicitly dealt with although certain tasks might have a cultural focus, such as when students prepare different ethnic foods to share.

7 What areas of language are emphasized? What language skills are emphasized?

The meaning dimension of language is emphasized. Depending on the nature of the task, any of the four skills can be utilized.

8 What is the role of the students' native language?

There is no explicit role for the students' native language.

9 How is evaluation accomplished?

The teacher constantly evaluates students in light of task outcomes and the language they use.

10 How does the teacher respond to student errors?

Focus on form is essential to students' learning. Error correction is done through recasts or modeling or by giving brief grammar explanations.

As we saw in the lesson we have just observed, in Prabhu's approach the teacher designs which tasks are to be worked on. Alternatively, Breen (1987) suggests that the choice of task should be negotiated between the teacher and students. A third way to decide on which tasks to include in a course is to conduct a needs analysis to determine which real-world tasks students will need to perform (Long, cited in Skehan 1998).

● Project Work

Another approach, which is also concerned with real-world language use, but is distinctive enough to merit special consideration, is project work. As with a task-based approach, the language practiced in the classroom is not predetermined, but rather derives from the nature of a particular project that students elect to do. For example, students might decide to take on a project such as publishing a school newspaper in the target language. This project would follow the same three stages of all projects (based on Fried-Booth 2002):

During the first stage, the students would work in their class, collaborating with their teacher, to plan the content and scope of the project and specific language needs they might have. They might also devise some strategies for how they would carry out the tasks, such as assigning each other specific roles to fulfill.

The second stage typically takes place outside the classroom and involves the gathering of any necessary information. For example, if the students have decided to publish a school newspaper, then this stage might involve their conducting interviews, taking photographs, and gathering printed or visual material. It would also include writing up their interviews and laying out, printing, and distributing the first edition of their newspaper. During this stage, students may well use all four skills in a natural, integrated fashion.

In the third and final stage, students review their project. They monitor their own work and receive feedback from the teacher on their performance. At each of these three stages, the teacher will be working with the students, acting as counselor and consultant, not as the project director.

By encouraging students to move out of the classroom and into the world, project work helps to bridge the gap between language study and language use. Project work also appeals to both the social and cognitive aspects of learning, which many teachers find important.

Reviewing the Techniques

Prabhu identified three types of tasks, all of which were represented in the lesson we have just observed: an information-gap, an opinion-gap, and a reasoning-gap task.

- **Information-gap Task**
  An information-gap activity, which we saw used previously in CLT and now in TBLT, involves the exchange of information among participants in order to complete a task. In the TBLT lesson, students had to exchange information within their groups in order to complete the schedule. Other examples might be where one student is given a picture and describes the picture for another student to draw, or where students draw each other's family trees.

- **Opinion-gap Task**
  An opinion-gap task requires that students express their personal preferences, feelings, or attitudes in order to complete the task. For instance, students might be given a social problem, such as high unemployment, and be asked to come up with a series of possible solutions, or they might be asked to compose a letter of advice to a friend who has sought their counsel about a dilemma. In our lesson, the students were only at the

advanced-beginning level. Their opinion-gap task was a rather simple one, which involved students' surveying their classmates about their most and least favorite subjects.[1]

Reasoning-gap Task

A reasoning-gap activity requires that students derive some new information by inferring it from information they have already been given. For example, students might be given a railroad schedule and asked to work out the best route to get from one particular city to another, or they might be asked to solve a riddle. In the lesson we observed, students were asked to use the results of their surveys or interviews to find out which were the three most popular and the least popular subjects. Prabhu (1987) feels that reasoning-gap tasks work best since information-gap tasks often require a single step transfer of information, rather than sustained negotiation, and opinion-gap tasks tend to be rather open-ended. Reasoning-gap tasks, on the other hand, encourage a more sustained engagement with meaning, though they are still characterized by a somewhat predictable use of language.

According to Ellis (2009), TBLT tasks can be unfocused or focused:

Unfocused Tasks

Unfocused tasks are tasks designed to provide learners with opportunities for communicating generally. The task described in the introduction to this chapter, where students have to plan an itinerary for a train trip, is an example. Students draw on their own language resources to fulfill the task.

Focused Tasks

Focused tasks are tasks designed to provide opportunities for communicating using some specific linguistic item, typically a grammar structure. The task of trying to identify the owner of a briefcase left in a taxi is an example. Of course, there is no guarantee that the task will elicit the grammar structure that the task designers intended (Loschky and Bley-Vroman 1993). As with all tasks, focused tasks should be meaningful. For this reason, the target linguistic feature of a focused task is 'hidden' (the learners are not told explicitly what the feature is) (Ellis 2009).[2]

One other distinction that Ellis (2009) makes is between input-providing and output-prompting tasks:

---

[1] See Cohen (2009) for another example of using surveys in TBLT.
[2] For further examples, see the series *Grammar Dimensions,* directed by Larsen-Freeman (2007).

- **Input-providing Tasks**

  Input-providing tasks engage learners with the receptive skills of listening and reading. We saw in the lesson in this chapter that the students completed a schedule with the content that the teacher provided.

  Input-providing (e.g. 'listen and do' tasks) not only work on the receptive skills, but also give teachers an opportunity to introduce new language.

- **Output-prompting Tasks**

  Output-prompting tasks stimulate the students to write or speak meaningfully. In our lesson, there was an output-prompting task when students had to share the information on their cards so that their group members could complete a schedule.

Conclusion

Task-based language teaching challenges mainstream views about language teaching in that it is based on the principle that language learning will progress most successfully if teaching aims simply to create contexts in which the learner's natural language learning capacity can be nurtured rather than making a systematic attempt to teach the language bit by bit (Ellis 2009: 222).

For some methodologists, there is no contradiction in saying this and at the same time saying that TBLT can also be complemented by explicit instruction in grammar and vocabulary; for others, focusing on forms is an unacceptable compromise. In any case, it is probably fair to say that TBLT is the one method that has support from SLA researchers.

Still, the question must always be asked if TBLT is appropriate for all teaching contexts (Andon and Eckerth 2009). While learners may well learn effectively using analytic syllabi, the adoption of such syllabi may be particularly difficult in situations where the success of language instruction is judged by examinations containing grammar and vocabulary items and questions.

Nevertheless, we have seen that task-based instruction can help to encourage students to use the target language actively and meaningfully. Therefore, if you decide that TBLT is appropriate in your teaching context, what appeals to you about task-based instruction? What reservations do you have? How would you go about choosing tasks? Can you imagine challenges in managing your task-based class? If so, how would you address them, or plan to make the most of the opportunities in task-based teaching while working effectively with the challenges?

Activities

> **Ⓐ Check your understanding of Task-based Language Teaching.**
> 1 Explain how TBLT is consistent with the use of an analytic syllabus.
> 2 What is input enhancement? Give an example. Why would you do it?

> **Ⓑ Apply what you have understood about Task-based Language Teaching.**
> 1 Think of one example of each of Prahbu's three types of task: information-gap, opinion-gap, and reasoning-gap. Try them out in the classroom and see what you can learn.
> 2 Draw up a list of projects that might be undertaken by your students. Remember that the project is not designed to suit a particular syllabus unit. Also remember the crucial fact that students want to be involved. On your list could be something like publishing a school newspaper as described in this chapter. Other ideas might be planning a field trip, conducting a survey, or researching a topic such as an environmental concern. If you do decide to have your students go ahead and work on a project, you may wish to consult Fried-Booth (2002).

References/Additional Resources

Adams, R. 2009. 'Recent publications on task-based language teaching: A review.' *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* 19/3: 339–55.

Andon, N. and J. Eckerth. 2009. 'Chacun à son goût? Task-based L2 pedagogy from the teacher's point of view.' *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* 19/3: 286–310.

Breen, M. 1987. 'Learner contributions to task design' in C. Candlin and D. Murphy (eds.). *Language Learning Tasks*, 23–46: Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Candlin, C. and D. Murphy (eds.). 1987. *Language Learning Tasks.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Cohen, J. 2009. 'Using student-generated surveys to enhance communication.' *Essential Teacher* 6/3–4: 42–4.

Dewey, J. 1913. *Interest and Effort in Education.* Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.

Eckerth, J. and S. Siekmann. 2008. *Task-based Language Learning and Teaching: Theoretical, Methodological, and Pedagogical Perspectives.* Frankfurt: Peter Lang.

Ellis, R. 2003. *Task-based Language Learning and Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

——. 2009. 'Task-based language teaching: Sorting out the misunderstandings.' *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* 19/3: 221–46.

Fried-Booth, D. 2002. *Project Work* (2nd edn.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

García Mayo, M. (ed.). 2007. *Investigating Tasks in Formal Language Learning*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Gass, S. 1997. *Input, Interaction, and the Second Language Learner*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Haines, S. 1989. *Projects for the EFL Classroom*. London: Nelson.

Larsen-Freeman, D. (Series Director) 2007. *Grammar Dimensions: Form, Meaning, and Use* (4th edn.). Boston: Heinle/Cengage.

Long, M. 1991. 'Focus on form: A design feature in language teaching methodology' in K. de Bot, R. Ginsberg, and C. Kramsch (eds.). *Foreign Language Research in Cross-cultural Perspective*, 39–52. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

——. 1996. 'The role of the linguistic environment in second language acquisition' in W. Ritchie, and T. Bahtia (eds.). *Handbook of Second Language Acquisition*, 413–68. New York: Academic Press.

——. 2009. 'Methodological principles for language teaching' in M. Long, and C. Doughty (eds.). *The Handbook of Language Teaching*, 373–94. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

——. and G. Crookes. 1993. 'Units of analysis in syllabus design: The case for task' in G. Crookes and S. Gass (eds.). *Tasks in a Pedagogical Context*, 9–54. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Loschky, L. and R. Bley-Vroman. 1993. 'Grammar and task-based methodology' in G. Crookes and S. Gass (eds.). *Tasks in Language Learning*, 123–67. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Norris, J. 2009. 'Task-based teaching and testing' in M. Long and C. Doughty (eds.). *The Handbook of Language Teaching*, 578–94. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Nunan, D. 2004. *Task-based Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Prabhu, N. S. 1987. *Second Language Pedagogy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Riggenbach, H., V. Samuda, and I. Wisniewska. 2007. *Grammar Dimensions* (Book 2, 4th edn.). Boston: Heinle/Cengage.

Rott, S. 2000. 'Teaching German grammar through communicative tasks: Some suggestions.' *Die Unterrichtspraxis* 33/2: 125–33.

Samuda, V. and M. Bygate. 2008. *Tasks in Second Language Learning*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Sheen, R. 2003. 'Focus-on-form: A myth in the making.' *ELT Journal* 57: 225–33.

Skehan, P. 1998. 'Task-based instruction.' *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics: Foundations of Second Language Teaching* 18.

Swan, M. 2005. 'Legislating by hypothesis: The case of task-based instruction.' *Applied Linguistics* 26/3: 376–401.

van den Branden, K. 2006. *Task-based Language Teaching: From Theory to Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

——. 2009. 'Mediating between predetermined order and chaos: The role of the teacher in task-based language education.' *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* 19/3: 264–85.

——, M. Bygate, and J. Norris. 2009. *Task-based Language Teaching: A Reader*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Wilkins, D. 1976. *Notional Syllabuses*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Willis, D. and J. Willis. 2007. *Doing Task-based Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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