LANGUAGE TASKS AND EXERCISES: HOW DO TEACHERS PERCEIVE THEM?

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ABSTRACT: *This study investigates teacher knowledge, in particular how teachers perceive the difference between a language exercise and a communicative task, and their design features. A number of twenty pre-service Brazilian teachers of English were asked to devise and analyze both pedagogical instruments. The results showed that task awareness and design skills should be developed in teacher education programs.*

KEYWORDS: *language exercise; communicative task; perceptions*

RESUMO: *Este estudo investiga o conhecimento do professor, em particular como eles percebem a diferença entre um exercício de língua e uma tarefa comunicativa, bem como seus elementos de design. Vinte professores de língua inglesa em formação inicial foram solicitados a elaborar e analisar esses instrumentos pedagógicos. Os resultados mostraram a necessidade de os cursos de formação de professores desenvolverem consciência sobre a noção de tarefa e habilidades de design.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *exercício de língua; tarefa comunicativa; percepções*

1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, when the term communicative task was introduced as a pedagogical unit in second/ foreign language teaching, scholars have acknowledged two types of written activities that derive from distinct learning paradigms: exercises and tasks.

Exercises "are activities that call for primarily form-focused language use" (ELLIS, 2003, p.3). They require a deliberate manipulation or practice of a linguistic item by the learner. The notion of exercise is thus related to some form of training or awareness of linguistic features of the target language (items of vocabulary, rules of grammar, spelling). The expected outcome is the use of the form(s) previously taught in either decontextualized sentences or in a context of situation. Examples of language exercises are: Completing sentences with the correct verb form; Writing a dialogue using the words and functions provided; Comparing two pictures using 'there is' and 'there are'. From this perspective,

learning a language through exercises is an explicit and intentional process.

Tasks, on the other hand, are activities that call for primarily meaning-focused language use. They are intended to engage the learners in meaning comprehension and production for a communicative outcome. Examples of language tasks are: Drawing a map while listening to a tape (RICHARDS, PLATT & WEBER, 1986); Solving a problem (WILLIS, 1996); Constructing class timetables from instructions/descriptions (PRABHU, 1987). For the present paper, a task is better defined as a "goal-oriented communicative activity with a specific outcome, where the emphasis is on exchanging meanings not producing specific language forms" (WILLIS, 1996, p.36). The expected outcome involves the learners' own linguistic choices to achieve a communicative goal. From this perspective, learning a language through tasks is an incidental or implicit[1] process.

Even though tasks and exercises differ in the view of how second/ foreign language is acquired, they may co-exist in a course or syllabus (e.g., Process Syllabus[2]). On the other hand, a number of tasks may be previously selected or designed, and then sequenced to be used in a course (Procedural syllabus – PRABHU, 1984, 1987; Task-Based Syllabus – LONG, 1985, LONG & CROOKES, 1992). Likewise, a number of exercises may be proposed in a teaching program (structural syllabus), depending on the teacher's approach to language learning.

Not always the distinction between an exercise and a task is clear among the teachers of English due to the modernization of the exercises that seem to disguise themselves as tasks, or tasks disguising themselves as exercises. As Ellis (2003, p.16) points out, "some language-teaching activities cannot easily be classified as a 'task' or an 'exercise' as they manifest

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[1] Implicit learning is learning without awareness (SCHMIDT, 2001, p.4)

[2] Breen's Process Syllabus entails a bank of activities which are themselves made up of sets of tasks. The activities are categorized according to "their own objectives, content, suggested procedure, and suggested ways of evaluating outcomes" (BREEN, 1987, p.167). The tasks, in turn, which are the actual working processes within the classroom, include things as "agreeing a definition of a problem, organizing data, deducing a particular rule or pattern, discussing reactions, etc." (BREEN, 1984, p.56). Based on these examples, as well as on the definition of tasks and exercises taken in the present study, it is possible to suggest that Process Syllabus can provide learners with both tasks and exercises.

features of both." For the author (2003), the main criterion for judging whether an activity is a task or an exercise lies in the primary focus of the activity itself (either meaning- or form-oriented). In this case, the difference can only be perceived if the teacher is able to disclose the designer's intention with the activity.

Due to the upgrade of the traditional language exercises, it is possible that teachers may find difficulties in labeling an activity as either a task or an exercise. This difficulty can thus affect the evaluation and selection process of written activities, as well as the design of the teachers' activities. What also seems to cause teachers some misunderstandings is the jargon used in language teaching, such as 'communicative exercise', 'communicative practice', and 'communicative grammar tasks'. Such terms do not seem to help teachers clarify the real identity of a task or exercise. Due to this difficulty, the present study aims to investigate how tasks and exercises are interpreted by pre-service teachers of English, particularly how they perceive the difference between an exercise and a task, as well as their design features. The following research questions were raised to guide the investigation: (a) How do pre-service teachers of English recognize exercises and tasks?; (b) What aspects do they consider a task and an exercise to have when devising and analyzing them?; and (c) What is the scope of their misunderstanding?

The answers to these questions aim to enhance English teachers' awareness of the different meanings that exercises and tasks make in the classroom, and help them reflect critically when analyzing, evaluating, selecting and producing teaching materials.

2. The participants

A number of 20 pre-service Brazilian teachers of English as a foreign language participated in this study. They were attending the last year of an English teacher education

program in a federal university in the south of Brazil when the present research started. Most of them were in their twenties with little or no experience in English language teaching. During the data collection that was carried out in 2006, the student teachers were enrolled in the discipline English Language Teaching Methodology under my responsibility. As a practical requirement for the course, they were required to teach a certain number of classes in Basic Education[3] schools where English is offered as a foreign language. Due to that, the participants are referred to as pre-service teachers in this study.

3. Data collection

All the participants were asked to perform three tasks: (1) to devise an exercise and a communicative task; (2) to compare three different written activities; (3) to identify the exercise(s) and the task(s), and justify their answers. The activities for comparison were chosen from an English textbook and a language material, both designed for beginning-level Brazilian secondary students.

The following categories were considered in the analysis of the participants' task and exercises (task 1 above): the activity goal (linguistic or communicative), type of meaning involved to achieve the outcome (semantic or pragmatic[4]), interactive elements (presence/absence of an interlocutor; context for the input), elements of realism and relevance (topic proposed, cognitive demand), and elements of design (rubrics, example, input data).

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[3] The Brazilian Basic Education involves *Ensino Fundamental* and *Ensino Médio*. *Ensino Fundamental* comprises 8 years of studies divided into four cycles: 1st and 2nd levels (First Cycle), 3rd and 4th levels (Second Cycle), 5th and 6th levels (Third Cycle), and 7th and 8th levels (Fourth Cycle). The First and Second Cycles equate with primary education. The pupils are between the ages of 7 and 10. The Third and Fourth Cycles may be compared to secondary education. The students are between approximately 11 and 14 years old. *Ensino Médio*, in turn, consists of 3 years of studies and the students are between 15 and 17 years old. In short, Basic Education covers students in the 7-17 age bracket. From the Third Cycle on, one foreign language is compulsory in the school curriculum. In some schools more than one foreign language is offered and the students may decide the foreign language they want to take. English is offered in most schools around the country.
[3] This and the next two instructions were removed from the textbook *American Wow 1*
[4] Pragmatic meaning is referred to the meaning of an utterance in a particular communicative context.

These categories were defined according to some of the features found in tasks and exercises (see ELLIS, 2003).

All the information given to distinguish a task from an exercise (task 2 above) was initially analyzed regardless the correct or incorrect labels given to the activities. Even though some participants have qualified a task as an exercise or vice-versa, the focus of the analysis lied in the aspects considered in their classification.

3.1 The activities

As mentioned earlier, the participants were provided with three written activities to be compared (one exercise and two tasks). They were expected to write the similarities and differences between them, label them as an exercise or task, and justify their answers. Most of the answers were given in the participants' native language (Portuguese) with which they felt more comfortable to express themselves.

The exercise consisted of a piece of information about time equivalents (e.g., *24 hours = 1 day*; *60 minutes = 1 hour*; *100 years = 1 century*; etc). The learners are supposed to read it and then write time sentences using the words and numbers provided (e.g., *century*; *day*; *hour*; etc – *100*; *24*; *60*; etc), according to the example (*There are 366 in a leap year*). This exercise was taken from a foreign textbook that was conceived for the 6th level Brazilian students of basic education.

One of the tasks addresses five questions to be answered in English about selective garbage cans (e.g., *What's the objective of these garbage cans?*; *What items are put in the red garbage cans? Give three examples.*; etc). In this activity the learners are expected to show their background knowledge about recycling. This task was removed from the site www.t4tenglish.ufsc.br which offers English language activities for teachers who work at the

Brazilian basic education system.

In the second task, the learners are supposed to read different situations to write their opinion about the people's attitudes (whether or not they are being sensible), and give a justification. An example is given to familiarize the learners with the type of text they are expected to write (Situation: *Mary is 15. Her boyfriend is 15, too. They decide to marry.* Possible answer: *They are not sensible because they are too young to marry*). This task was taken from a set of activities on Adolescence that had been implemented in a 5th level group of students as a result of a research on task-based thematic teaching (XAVIER, 1999).

The main features that were considered to qualify these activities as 'exercise' and 'task' were their primary focus (form/ meaning), their goal (linguistic/ communicative), and the type of meaning involved to achieve the outcome (semantic/ pragmatic).

4. Data analysis

The data were analyzed according to what the participants were asked to perform. The following subsections summarize this analysis.

4.1 Comparison of the activities

In comparing the activities, most of the participants were able to distinguish a task from an exercise identifying correctly Activity 1 and 3 as tasks and Activity 2 as an exercise. For this classification they considered the following aspects: the input, the activity goal, type of outcome, cognitive demand and language control.

The input provided in the exercise was perceived as grammar-oriented, and thus disconnected with the students' real lives or real situations. Those participants who mistakenly qualified Activity 1 as an exercise (20%) realized that it enables the students to learn new

vocabulary, expanding their lexical knowledge. This interpretation was due to the last four questions of the activity that require examples of items that are thrown in the different selective garbage cans (red, blue, yellow, and green). Such items refer to the new and known vocabulary the students should use. Along these lines, other participants interpreted Activity 1 as an exercise regarding the same language structure the students would have to use to initiate their answers to these questions (i.e. "What items are put in the red garbage cans? Give three examples." - "We put ...."). In this case, the participants seem to impose a linguistic goal on a communicative task.

The task input, on the other hand, was perceived as being related to real-life topics, in particular to meaningful, current and relevant issues to the students. For some participants, a task also requires the students' background knowledge of a topic, which suggests that the input has also to be familiar to them.

While the goal of the exercise was perceived as structural practice, the goal of the tasks was perceived as conversational exchange. Some participants noticed that the linguistic items to be practiced in Activity 2 consist of the verb 'there to be' in its present form (there is/ there are) as well as numbers and dates. Therefore, the expected outcome entails the repetition of the same structures along the exercise, having only one correct answer as a requirement. For the participants, an exercise manifests more language control on the students than a communicative task. In Activity 2, the form of control is signaled in the example provided, which illustrates how the sentences should be constructed using the target structure(s).

Language tasks, in turn, are seen as activities that generate "conversation" between teacher and students, enabling the latter to discuss and/or express their opinions about a topic. Almost all the participants mentioned this aspect as main feature of a task. Even though Activities 1 and 3 aim to enhance students' written expression, they were perceived as having

potential to develop students' oral production ("discussion"; "dialogue", "debate").

According to the participants, the predicted outcome of a task involves the use of different structures and vocabulary to express meaningful and relevant content. Therefore, the students are expected to use their own linguistic resources to communicate. In addition to the linguistic flexibility, more than one correct answer is expected in a task. In this sense, less language control and more possible answers increase the students' chances to enlarge their linguistic knowledge as well as the teacher's possibility to engage students in conversation. Unlike the example of Activity 2, the example provided in Activity 3 was viewed as an illustration rather than a model to be followed, because the students' answers will vary according to the situation, and this can help the teachers "to enlarge the dialogue" (PST 5, 6).

Another aspect considered in the comparison of the activities was the humanistic view that underlies a task. For the participants, this type of activity enables the students to express their "feelings", "opinions", "personal experiences" and "background knowledge" that should be taken into consideration. In this case, both Activity 1 and 3 are perceived as opportunities for the students to express their previous knowledge about a topic (Recycling and Relationship in adolescence, respectively), connecting the learners with their social and cultural contexts.

As to the cognitive demand, the participants realized that a task encourages students' reflection and critical awareness on both the language to be used (how to say) and the content to be discussed (what to say). This way, a task enables the students to focus on both form and meaning simultaneously. An exercise, on the other hand, is not viewed as demanding some reflection on language, since it requires "mechanical production" and "obvious sentence formation".

4.2 Design of the activities

Most of the participants (80%) were able to devise an exercise, considering its main features: a linguistic goal, semantic meaning and a defined linguistic outcome. The outcome of the exercises involved the display of particular grammatical knowledge (e.g. vocabulary, verb tenses, semantic meaning, linguistic parts of semantic chunks that manifest communicative functions). The following types of exercises were designed: sentence or dialogue completion, sentence or noun phrase formation, transformation, text translation, matching, drawing and naming, general grammar questions, and word classification. The first two types were the most frequent among the participants (30% and 20%, respectively). Writing was, therefore, the main skill required in these exercises.

Apparently the participants designed traditional language exercises; however, it was possible to observe that some elements were incorporated to engage the students in using the target language in an appealing way. These elements derive from some language aspects, such as 'interaction', 'realism', and 'relevance'. The interactive elements consisted of the presence of one or more interlocutors to whom the linguistic outcome should be addressed (e.g. "One group discovers the false phrases of the other group"). Group work was thus proposed in some exercises. Elements of competition were also introduced aiming to promote students' motivation and engagement (e.g., "game rules", "number of points").

The elements of realism and relevance consisted of the grammar contextualization (use of dialogues and other types of texts, as poems and letters to contextualize the targeted linguistic item), the students' immediate context or reality (use of song lyrics for translation, family members or famous people, sentences related to the students' lives), and the cognitive demand on the students (more reasoning on the targeted structures).

As to the elements of design, only 50% of the participants were able to build an

exercise using any of the three potential functional stages of a written activity: Rubrics, Example, and Input data. The other half of the participants briefly described their teaching procedures, as shown in the example below:

> I would write a dialogue or part of it on the board. The students would have to read it aloud and I would gradually erase some of the words. For example: Hi, James! How _____ you? The student would have to complete it orally. The class may be organized in groups and I would calculate their correct answers. (PST 2 – My translation)

Based on the different procedures described by the participants, it is possible to suggest that the rubrics of the exercises are preferably explained to the students, which discards its presence in the design of the exercise.

As to the task design, most of the participants (65%) showed a mistaken view of a task. For them, this type of activity can be equated to a conversational exchange (i.e., group or pair discussion of a topic) or communicative practice (i.e., simulation of real-life situations). In both cases, no outcome is expected from the interaction, which does not give them the status of a task.

In proposing a conversational exchange, the participants considered features such as (a) primary focus on (pragmatic) meaning since the students are required to discuss about a current, social or personal theme; (b) real-world processes of language use, such as stating, questioning, and negotiating meanings; and (c) cognitive processes, such as language selection, comparison, and understanding. Based on these features, the participants proposed a meaning-focused activity, which cannot be labeled a communicative task.

In proposing communicative practice, on the other hand, the participants considered the use of particular functions, i.e. their linguistic realizations and vocabulary in a simulated communicative context. Even though interactive elements have been incorporated in the

activity (setting, role and purpose) so that the students could "exchange ideas, information (information gap)", and "negotiate meanings" (PST 2, 4, 10), the participants seemed to have planned a form-focused activity, since it intended to engage the students in practicing language formulas and vocabulary. Considering that this activity does not involve an outcome, except for the students' responses to something their colleagues have said or done, it may not be qualified as an exercise either.

As to those participants who were able to devise a task (5 teachers - 25%), their proposals varied in terms of format: Answering questions using background knowledge of the subject; Writing a story to be read and told by a classmate; Reading two letters from an Agony Column to give the readers some advice; and Interviewing a classmate to compare his/her answers with your own. Based on these examples, only a few participants perceived that a task requires a defined communicative outcome.

The sketch of a task was made by only three participants out of five. Considering these sketches, it is possible to assert that the rubrics are preferably explained by the teacher instead of being offered in the written mode. The other two participants gave a brief explanation of their teaching procedures.

In designing their tasks, the participants also considered interactive elements, as the presence of an external interlocutor (a fictitious or real person outside the classroom) or an internal interlocutor (their classmates for some information-gap activity or collaborative work). The elements of relevance are related to the content of the task. In other words, the participants recognize that a task requires meaningful content. Due to this, they argue for the use of familiar, current, social, and age-related themes, as well as the use of texts that may be of the students' interest.

5. Discussion

Most of the teachers perceived an 'exercise' as a form-focused activity and a 'task' as a meaning-focused activity. However, this feature alone (primary focus on form or meaning) is not enough to qualify an exercise or a task. The data showed that even though 'communicate practice' may be focused on particular forms or language formulas, it cannot be an exercise since no outcome is derived from such practice. Not even a task either as some participants have interpreted it.

Along those lines, a 'conversational exchange' can be a meaning-focused activity without a status of task necessarily, since no communicative outcome is derived from this exchange, except if the teacher establishes some type of work upon the data exchanged. Both a conversational exchange and a task, however, may share the same goal: engaging students in language use.

Based on the design the participants gave to the activities, the input of both tasks and exercises can vary from a single sentence to larger units of discourse (dialogues, poems, letters), depending on the activity goal (communicative or linguistic). In this sense, the architecture of an written activity does not signal necessarily a task or an exercise. For most participants, however, a task has enormous potential to develop the students' oral production, which suggests that a communicative task is intended to focus on speaking. This view is based on the participants' analysis of a task and their design of a "supposed task". A task aims, therefore, to elicit oral production (discussion, debate, dialogue, expression of ideas), which seems to constrain the notion of communicative task.

The participants' language exercises suggest that some teachers feel the need to modernize this type of activity, incorporating interactive elements and elements of realism and relevance into the final design. Some implementation procedures that were described for

the exercises also showed the teachers' concern with the students' participation before and during the exercise ("discussing the words with the students", "asking questions to the students", eliciting words from the class").

The use of interactive elements (presence of one or more interlocutors), as well as elements of realism and relevance (real-life content, context for the linguistic input, learners' immediate context, cognitive demand) may apparently disguise an exercise and hide its true identity. On the other hand, the design of a task may also lead the teachers to interpret this type of activity as an exercise. Some participants, for instance, perceived Activity 1 as an exercise rather than a task due to the type of answers required in the questions 2 to 5 (i.e., vocabulary related to a particular semantic field – recyclable items) and to the complete answers the teachers expect from the students ("We put.... in the .... garbage can."). In this case, any form of linguistic regularity found in a task may lead the teacher to *de-taskify*[5] the original design, imposing a linguistic view over the communicative content. From another perspective, these participants seem to have misunderstood the activity goal, resulting in a perceptual mismatch between the task designer's intention and the teacher's interpretation. Other potential sources of perceptual mismatches are discussed in Kumaravadivelu (1994).

If this misunderstanding was possible with an unfocused task, we can imagine how teachers would interpret and manage focused tasks, which are designed to contain a recurrent linguistic feature (in comprehension) or elicit the use of specific linguistic features (in production) so as to promote implicit learning.

Another interesting aspect refers to the content of a task which is perceived as a very important element in both analysis and design. The task content is expected to involve real-life issues, such as "pollution", "traffic", "violence", "physical exercises", suggesting the use of current social themes that may interest the students. In this sense, a task involves two

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[5] For Samuda (2005, p.1), "teachers can transform the design of a task both proactively and reactively by tweaking, adjusting or deleting existing elements of the design or by adding new ones. These may have the effect of *retaskifying* the original design and of *detaskifying* it."

different dimensions of meaning construction: pragmatic meaning (language use in a context) and personal meaning (students' understanding and interpretation of the world). As a result, a view of discourse and cultural context are necessary requirements to the notion of task.

Finally, the data showed that some teachers disregard the written rubrics in the design of language exercises and tasks, which suggests their preference for oral explanations of what the students are required to do in the activity. Such a preference, however, may compromise the framework of the activity, because the students can only count on the teacher's explanation, with no written support to solve possible problems of understanding. Besides, the students should be encouraged to read the instructions of the activities, and probably explain them to the class, so as to promote learner autonomy, self-confidence, and collaborative understanding.

6. Final remarks

The present study has signaled that the notions of both language task and language exercise should be clearly defined and discussed in pre-service English teacher education programs, as well as in on-going teacher education courses, aiming to provide the teachers with well-defined knowledge and design skills to analyze, evaluate, select, adapt, and produce their own exercises and tasks.

Since both tasks and exercises can be enhanced or subverted during their implementation, methodological procedures should also be considered in the reflective teacher agenda, in particular forms of task implementation and assessment. The process of task / exercise design, implementation, and assessment enables the teachers to reflect before, during and after their actions on goals, content, format, sequence, procedures, correction, good/ bad activities, learning results, teachers' and students' attitudes. This form of teaching

awareness evolves from the teachers' decision making process that, in its turn, results from their implicit theories and beliefs, experiential knowledge and skills.

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