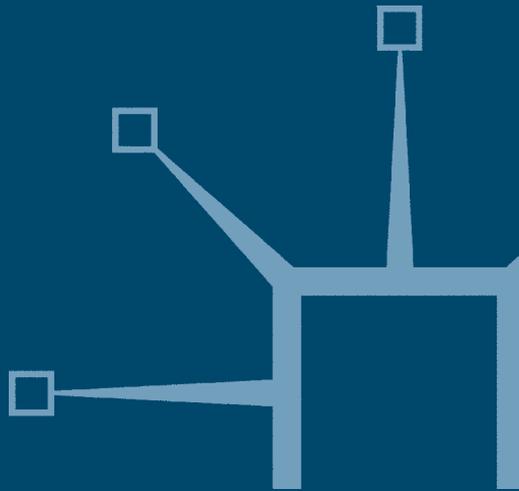


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# Designing Language Teaching Tasks

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Keith Johnson



## Designing Language Teaching Tasks

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# Designing Language Teaching Tasks

*Keith Johnson*

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*For Helen and Hugh*

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My greatest debt is to the 16 designers who put their necks on the block, and thought aloud as they did so. They made this book, and it is about them.

# 1

## Why Study Task Design?

### 1.1 Designing language teaching tasks: an expertise study and a procedural analysis

Many years ago, a colleague and I went to Italy to run a series of workshops on how to write language teaching materials for use in the classroom.<sup>1</sup> All the teachers attending our workshops were highly experienced, and had been selected because of their expertise as teachers. They were the *crème de la crème*. By the end of the sessions some of them had revealed themselves to be gifted materials designers, able to produce activities with accompanying teachers' notes such that the activities could be given to another teacher who would be able to use them in their own class with success. But what astonished me at the time was not how many successful materials designers emerged, but how many of the teaching *crème de la crème* showed no ability at all in the materials design realm. I think I had assumed that a good teacher would be able to produce good teaching materials for use by others. But the areas of expertise proved to be different.

This book is about designing, not whole textbooks, but one of their constituent parts – tasks or activities – for use in the foreign language classroom. Most language teaching professionals do this at some point in their careers. Some people make it their job, and become professional textbook writers. Others do it regularly but to a more modest extent. They may be senior teachers, part of whose job involves producing pieces of materials for use by teachers working on a course they are directing, or they may be teachers at any level who are in the habit of taking activities from published textbooks and modifying them for use in their particular context with their particular students.

The main question we are attempting to answer is: what constitutes expertise in task/activity design? We are hence undertaking an 'expertise study', attempting to identify the characteristics that single out experts from non-experts in this particular field. Expertise studies can have two components, or take two directions. One is to specify what experts are 'like'. We may, for example, end up saying that expert task/activity designers are often sensitive to the social and educational context within which their learners are working. This is an *attribute* which, we may say, experts develop and possess. The other type of statement we may end up making is to do with *procedures*. For example, we might discover that expert designers often begin by seeking real world situations in which we would use the language they wish to practise, and then try to turn one of these into a classroom task. In this book we will do attribute analysis, but there will be a concerted effort at what we shall call *procedural analysis*. We will seek to answer questions like: What do designers do first? What second? What strategies do they follow when designing a task? What issues do they confront? How do they solve them?

The intention is that this book should have something to offer a variety of readers. It aims to contribute to the research literature in what is (it is argued in the next section) a so far ignored field – the study of expertise in areas associated with language teaching. But as well as being aimed at the applied linguistic researcher, the book is also intended for all language teaching professionals. This is because it also has a practical aim, to assist language teachers both to become more proficient themselves as task designers, and also to train others to do so. To this it should be added that although the book deals with task design in the English as a foreign language area, what is said can apply equally to task design in relation to the teaching of any other foreign language.

### 1.2 Applied linguistic expertise studies: a sparsely populated terrain

It is surprising how little questions like those in the last paragraph but one have been asked in applied linguistics. If we consider the specific area of task/activity design, there are some books whose titles sound promising. Chief among these is Nunan's (1989) *Designing Tasks for the Communicative Classroom*. But although this book provides a useful taxonomy of language teaching tasks, it does not really make any attempt at procedural analysis. Tomlinson (1998) contains a useful section entitled 'The process of materials writing', but the amount of

actual procedural analysis is small. No publication really does much more. Similarly, little attention has been paid to the study of expertise in task design. We know very little about what makes a good task designer.

If we look beyond the immediate realm of task design, yet still stay within applied linguistics and areas relevant to it, we will find more, but not an immense amount. The general educational literature field has a few studies of teacher procedures. Clark & Yinger (1987), for example, study how teachers plan their lessons and courses. Though papers like this (and there are quite a few others) do not specifically focus on the foreign language teacher, they are clearly relevant in that context. One of the few that does concentrate on language teaching is Woods's (1996) book *Teacher Cognition in Language Teaching*. This is largely an attribute (or cognition) analysis, but it does contain some useful portions of procedural analysis. There are also a number of expertise studies concerned with the language learner and the language user. This includes the good language learner studies (e.g. Naiman *et al.* 1978), and numerous studies of expertise in specific skills like reading and writing (e.g. Scardamalia & Bereiter 1991). There is also an emerging literature in the area of writing items for language tests (of which Alderson *et al.* 2000 is an example), and this area promises to develop procedural analysis in the field. So there is something in the literature relevant to applied linguistics, but not an immense amount, particularly if we think about language teaching rather than language learning and use. Chapter 2 contains brief summaries of some relevant literature.

Why is the terrain so sparsely populated? Foreign language teaching is, after all, such a common human activity – one estimate<sup>2</sup> has a billion people in the world today learning English (just one of the world's 4500 or so languages) as a foreign language. So one might expect quite a body of research into understanding professional expertise in language teaching. Bereiter & Scardamalia (1993) is a book we shall make much use of. In it, they argue persuasively for the importance of expertise studies in all areas. Their argument is based on the fact that the modern world is marked by great social changes which require individuals and societies to show flexibility, and a preparedness to develop new skills and areas of expertise in a comparatively short time. They in fact claim that we are on the edge of discovering a 'method of expertise' that will enable us systematically to turn novices into experts. Their argument is indeed persuasive, and suggests that there are many areas of applied linguistics which will benefit from procedural analysis and expertise studies. These include syllabus design (answering the questions: What

do syllabus designers do when they design syllabuses? What makes a good syllabus designer?), teacher education, language teaching project management, and many others. An entire manifesto of expertise research suggests itself.

### 1.3 Tasks and activities

Apart from these arguments for research in the general fields of applied linguistics, there is also a specific reason for this kind of work in the field of task design. It is that task-based teaching is, at this present time, a topic attracting a lot of interest in language teaching. A good deal of research effort has gone into such issues as task complexity (what makes one task easier or more difficult to do) and closely observing the variables that control how learners perform when they undertake language teaching tasks. Books such as Skehan (1998) and Bygate *et al.* (2001), as well as the earlier Prabhu (1987), discuss task-based teaching at length and provide frameworks for it. Given this interest in tasks, it is timely to show an interest in how they are designed.

But it is necessary at the outset to specify how are we using the word 'task' in this book. The word may be said to have two uses, a 'specialised' and a 'general' one. In the task-based teaching literature there are, quite understandably, many attempts to define the term, and to distinguish a 'task' from an 'activity' and an 'exercise'. Figure 1.1 (based on Kumaravadivelu 1993) provides some sample definitions of the term used in this specialised, task-based-teaching related sense. The other ('general') use of the word is to mean something synonymous with 'activity', referring to 'what we give students to do in classrooms'. When many people talk about task design, they mean simply 'designing activities for use in the class'.

Is the term task being used in its specialised or general meaning in this book? The answer is really the latter. In the study we shall be describing, we asked 16 individuals to design an activity involving the function of *describing people*. The instructions given to our subjects are on p. 29. They do not specify that the resulting activity should be a 'task' in the specialised sense of the word. In the event many designers did in fact produce activities that might be called tasks following the kinds of definition found in Figure 1.1. But some did not, and this is one reason why we cannot say the study is concerned with tasks in the specialised, task-based teaching sense. This did not worry us, and indeed we deliberately avoided asking our designers to produce tasks in line with some provided definition. One reason for this was not to

Long (1985: 89)	'a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward'. "Tasks" are the things people will tell you they do if you ask them and they are not applied linguists' (both p. 89)
Crookes (1986: 1)	'a piece of work or an activity, usually with a specified objective, undertaken as part of an educational course, at work, or used to elicit data for research'
Wright (1987: 48)	'instructional questions which ask, demand, or even invite learners (or teachers) to perform operations on input data'
Krahnke (1987: 57)	'the defining characteristic of task-based content is that it uses activities that the learners have to do for non-instructional purposes outside of the classroom as opportunities for language learning. Tasks are distinct from other activities to the degree that they have non-instructional purposes'
Breen (1987: 23)	'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'
Candlin (1987: 10)	'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: 10)	'a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right'
Swales (1990: 76)	'one of a set of differentiated, sequencable goal-directed activities drawing upon a range of cognitive and communicative procedures relatable to the acquisition of pre-genre and genre skills appropriate to a foreseen or emerging sociorhetorical situation'
Skehan (1998: 95)	'... a task is an activity in which: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– meaning is primary</li> <li>– there is some communication problem to solve</li> <li>– there is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities</li> <li>– task completion has some priority</li> <li>– the assessment of the task is in terms of outcome</li> </ul>

Figure 1.1 Some definitions of task. Based on Kumaravadivelu (1993)

prevent the participation of individuals who might be expert designers but who were either not familiar with the narrow ‘task-based teaching’ school of thought, or who did not subscribe to its views.

What we are, then, interested in, is how designers prepare ‘activities’ (or ‘tasks’ in the more general sense) for use in the language classroom. This statement may upset readers attracted to the book because of the word ‘task’ in its title, taking this to mean the book is about task-based teaching. But they should not be upset. This is because language teaching’s current interest in task-based teaching can be seen as part of a more general movement over the past few decades away from an interest in the *content* of language teaching (what we teach, what our syllabus contains) towards the procedures of language teaching (how we teach, the types of activities we give our learners). This shift in focus from *what* to *how* is what is behind the development of ‘communicative methodology’ in the 1980s, and indeed (as a reading of Willis 1996 will reveal) many of the classroom procedures we now call tasks have much in common with what in the 1980s we called communicative activities. Task-based teaching needs to be seen in this perspective: interest in *tasks*, with all the specific characteristics mentioned in Figure 1.1, are part of a more general interest in *activities*.

We share with task-based teaching an interest in ‘what we give students to do in classrooms’, and we believe the study of this to be central to the concerns of a wide range of teachers. This embraces teachers who follow a task-based approach, but includes others also.

#### **1.4 The need for applied linguistic expertise studies**

But why, in practice, are expertise studies needed? How might they benefit the field? The most immediately obvious answer to these questions relates to the training of experts. If we know what constitutes expertise in an area, we will be provided with essential information on which to base the training of experts. Understanding expertise is, one might argue, the first step in training expertise. But this view introduces another important question – whether or not expertise can be taught. Can we take some of the findings of this study and turn them into lessons which will result in the creation of experts? We do not know the answer to this question, and we shall largely leave it unexplored here. We can, though, note that similar questions are being asked in other domains, and in other areas of applied linguistics. Schoenfeld (1985), for example, discusses the issue of training at some length in relation to mathematics problem solving, while in the area of language learning

strategy studies, a similar question is often asked – can good learning strategies be taught? We do not yet know whether language teaching task design can be taught, but part of the rationale for studies like the one we will describe here is the possibility that it might.

This book describes work undertaken over a period of four and a half years. The first three years were taken up by a project funded by the ESRC,<sup>3</sup> while research in the last year and a half has been supported by the Leverhulme Trust.<sup>4</sup> We shall now briefly describe the outline of work done at these two stages.

## 1.5 The ESRC project

In 1995 the British research funding agency, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), set up a programme of research in the area of cognitive engineering. The programme's website ([www.cogeng.gla.ac.uk](http://www.cogeng.gla.ac.uk)) describes cognitive engineering as modelling 'the design problems associated with interactive systems, which typically involve people, computers and organisations'. One of the projects within the programme was entitled 'Capturing expertise in task design for instruction and assessment' and it looked at two domains, the teaching of EFL and the teaching of mathematics. As this title states, the project was concerned with task design in two domains, both language and mathematics teaching. We shall here describe just the language teaching work, which had four stages.

### *Stage 1*

Since the project dealt with tasks, we collected together a large number of language teaching tasks/activities. From this collection we chose 12 tasks that represented some major activity types (like 'information gap', 'information transfer' 'describe and draw' 'jigsaw' and so on). We printed each activity on a card (and made some other changes) in order to standardise the format. These 12 tasks were then used as input to Stage 2.

### *Stage 2*

We were interested at this stage in what task designers 'see', on their cognitions regarding tasks, how they categorise tasks, how they evaluate various task types. We dealt with two groups of individuals. One group consisted of eight specialist designers (we shall call these S designers throughout the book). To qualify as an S designer an individual must have spent at least five years engaged in a major way in task design. All

of the S designers in this study had in fact produced published sets of materials; they were textbook writers. The second group were novices in the area. They were all students following a PGCE course in modern languages teaching at St Martin's College, Lancaster. We interviewed each individual following a semi-structured format, and began by asking them to evaluate the 12 language teaching tasks we had on cards. This led to questions regarding their views on the role of tasks in language teaching. We finally asked the subjects to sort the 12 tasks into appropriate categories. Card sorting is a technique used in the psychology literature (see Chi *et al.* 1981 for example), and the way individuals group items can reveal much about how they conceptualise. One area where the technique has revealed differences is in expert/novice comparisons, and it seemed possible that our two groups would organise the tasks on cards in different ways.<sup>5</sup> The 16 interviews resulting from this stage were recorded and transcribed.

### *Stage 3*

Stage 3 involved a procedural analysis. For this study we used the same eight S designers used at Stage 2, though for various reasons it was necessary to replace the St Martin's 'novices' with a group of eight practising teachers in the process of following an MA in Linguistics for ELT course at Lancaster University. We referred to these individuals as NS (for non-specialist) designers. Later this was modified to NS/T (for non-specialist, teacher), to capture the important fact that these people, though not specialists in task design, nevertheless had much relevant experience as teachers. Seven of these NS/T designers were British native speakers of English, and one was a non-native teacher from China.

At Stage 3 our 16 subjects (8 S designers and 8 NS/T designers) were given a 'task design brief', asking them to design a task/activity which centred around the functional area of *describing people*. The design brief is given on p. 29. Wherever possible, sessions took place in the Lancaster University Psychology Department's video laboratory. Sessions usually lasted about two hours. Subjects were asked to verbalise as they designed the task. The proceedings were taped (where possible on video as well as audio tape), transcribed, coded and analysed. Because Stage 3 is what this book is mainly about, we shall describe its procedures in much more detail in subsequent chapters.

### *Stage 4*

The final stage involved the production of a draft *Task Design Guide* intended to help anyone interested to learn how to design language

teaching tasks. Part 1 of the draft guide has appeared as Samuda *et al.* (2000).<sup>6</sup>

The amount of data collected in the ESRC project was huge, and we found it necessary to restrict our study of it in pursuit of a few chosen aims. Attention was given to comparisons across domains, to an attempt to contribute to the problem-solving literature, and to the development of research methods for studying design. For descriptions of the project's results, see Ormerod *et al.* (1999) and Johnson (2000).

## 1.6 The Leverhulme project

In the ESRC study, the EFL data sets contributed to the aims as described above. But these sets are extremely rich, and provide a wealth of detailed information which goes well beyond what was utilised within the ESRC project. It was felt that if these data sets were analysed in detail they would potentially provide a full and insightful account into the specific area of foreign language teaching task design. A further aspect of the ESRC project which restricts its potential utility to the applied linguistic community is that it was taken for granted that the tasks produced by the more experienced task designers (the 'experts') were indeed superior to those produced by the 'novices'. The tasks actually produced were not subjected to any form of independent evaluation, according to agreed-on criteria.

The Leverhulme Trust provide the opportunity for the Stage 3 data to be analysed in much more detail. It also allowed a small amount of further data collection to take place. This involved providing the amount of independent evaluation mentioned above, and described in more detail in Chapter 8. This book is the result of the Leverhulme project; essentially it is based on data collected at Stage 3 of the ESRC study.

## 1.7 Plan of the book

In Chapter 2 we shall look in more detail at what has been done in expertise studies, both in and outside the fields of education and applied linguistics. Then, in Chapter 3, we discuss the methodology of the current study, two main issues being the use of think-aloud protocols, and matters related to coding. Chapter 4 will look at the protocols of two designers, to provide a feel for how the designers worked. Chapters 5 and 6 discuss the findings of our analysis in detail. In Chapter 7 we take from these findings what we think we can say about what makes

a good task designer, and the reader who wishes to find a brief summary of conclusions will therefore find it in that chapter. In the final chapter we shall return briefly to an issue discussed above, the question of whether design expertise can be taught. We shall also look at how a group of teachers evaluated the tasks produced by our designers.

There are six appendices, and the reader may find it useful to have attention drawn at this early stage to three of them in particular. Appendix 6 contains shortened and standardised versions of the final tasks produced by all 16 of our designers, and these will be useful to refer to as contextualisation for relevant parts of discussion throughout the book. Appendix 1 contains all the codes used in analysing the protocols, and Appendix 5 collects together some pieces of 'philosophy' which our designers indulged in as they told us their thoughts.

## **1.8 Troublesome pronouns**

In Johnson (2001a) I noted that today we are in the midst of what I called the 'great English gender crisis'. It is now no longer possible, I argued, to use 'he', 'him' and 'his' in a generic way, while alternatives like '(s)he', 'his or her' are clumsy. My solution in that book was to populate each chapter with just one gender. I shall do the same here. So in Chapter 2 all generic references (to teachers, learners, task designers and the like) are female, and in Chapter 3 they are all male, and so on through the book.

Although the present chapter uses the pronoun 'I' a lot, I have to confess to an unfashionable dislike to its use in academic discourse. I shall therefore in general resort to a distinctly unroyal 'we', which is to be understood as 'I'. When I need to refer to myself and other researchers (the more usual use of 'we'), I shall try to clarify that that is the sense.