**Lesson Two: Designing Communicative Tasks**

**2.1 Definitions**

Concerning the place of tasks in the curriculum, some confusion still prevails in recent literature. The question that is often raised is whether ‘task’ pertains to syllabus design or to methodology.

As it is traditionally held, syllabus design refers to the ‘what’ or content of language teaching, and methodology refers to ‘how’ or the way of language teaching.

Kumaravadivelu (1993, p. 73) noted that task has been used to refer both to content and methodology in L2 teaching, but with the recent emergence of task-based methodology the term has been mainly used to refer to methodology.

An alternative view to the status of tasks in the curriculum is provided by Nunan (1988, p. 16) who contended that “looked at in traditional terms (i.e. seeing syllabus design as being primarily concerned with the specification of what learners will learn, and methodology as being mainly concerned with specifying how learners will learn) the design of learning tasks is part of methodology. However, if we see curriculum planning as an integrated set of processes involving, among other things, the specification of both what and how, then the argument over whether the design and development of tasks belong to syllabus design or to methodology becomes unimportant”.

A series of definitions provided by various researchers in the field.

Long provided a clear definition of the term task by saying that it is “a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward. Thus, for some examples of tasks include painting a fence, dressing a child, filling out a form, buying a pair of shoes, making an airline reservation, borrowing a library book, taking a driving test, typing a letter, weighing a patient, sorting letters, taking a hotel reservation, writing a cheque, finding a sheet destination and helping someone across a road. 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 are not applied linguists” (1985, p. 89).

From this definition, we may say that Long proposes a behavioural, non-linguistic definition on what is done not on what is said reflecting tasks performed by people at large in everyday life; that is to say, these are real-world tasks not special classroom tasks.

Similarly, Krahuke (1987) said that “the defining characteristics 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”.

Thus, it is clear that tasks are not directed towards enhancing instructional purposes in the classroom; they are activities that prepare learners to behave conveniently and appropriately as a response to authentic communication in the real world.

On the other hand, Richards, Platt and Weber (1985, p. 289) provided a pedagogical definition by saying that it is “an activity 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, listening to an instruction and performing a command, may be referred to as tasks. Tasks may or may not include the production of language. A task usually requires the teacher to specify what will be regarded as a successful completion of a task. The use of different kinds of tasks in language teaching is said to make language teaching more communicative…since it provides a purpose for a classroom activity which goes beyond the practice of language for its own sake”.

“Piece of work or activity, usually with a specified objective, undertaken as part of educational course, or at work” (Long & Crookes, 1992, p. 44).

“A piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally on meaning rather than form” (Nunan, 1989, p. 10).

This is a pedagogical definition where learners have to cope with language skills for communicative purposes and where emphasis is said on meaning rather than form.

**2.2 Characteristics of Tasks**

They must have the following tasks:

* They are an intrinsic relationship with real world activities
* Emphasis is laid on meaning rather than form
* They are concerned with ends or task completion rather than means or language display
* There is a concentration or the negotiation of meaning and exchange of meaning
* They engage learners in communicative problem solving activities
* They are quite different from grammatical exercises and practice activities
* They discard any form of drilling, repetition and mechanical question-answer activities
* They are based on needs identification
* They are distinct from structure-based communicative activities as found in the communicative approach
* They provide ample opportunities for communication and interaction focused on an exchange of information

**2.3 Task Components**

For tasks to be complete in their own right, Nunan (1989) suggested six key components:

1. **Goals**

Goals refer to general intentions and aims of the designed tasks. By providing answers to the question: “why did you get learners to engage in task x?”, teachers will get some goal statements such as to develop learners’ confidence in speaking, writing, interacting, etc. they are classified as communicative and cultural answers.

“Goal may relate to a range of general outcomes (communicative, affective or cognition) or may directly describe teacher or learner behaviour” (Nunan, 1989, p. 48).

1. **Input**

It “refers to the data that form the point of departure for the task” (Nunan, 1989, p. 53) and can be derived from a large battery of sources such as letters, newspaper extracts, picture stories, family tree, shopping lists, maps, weather forecast, bus timetable, programme, etc.

1. **Activities**

“Specify what learners will actually do with the input” (Nunan, 1989, p. 59). He suggested three ways of characterizing activities:

* **Authentic and non-authentic activities**: the former refer to real world activities and the latter to pedagogic ones. As language is a means of communication, classroom activities should parallel authenticity.
* **Skill getting and skill using:** these appertain to the conventional distinction between “controlled practice” where learners learn the phonological and grammatical forms of language and “transfer activities” where learners use these linguistic forms in real communication.
* **Accuracy and fluency:** activities may be divided into those which emphasize accuracy or fluency. Although accuracy and fluency complement each other, activities are generally designed as if they were mutually exclusive, and teachers should opt for what seems to be of primary importance to the learners.
1. **Learner roles**

Accordingto Nunan (1989, p. 79), role refers to “part that the learners and teachers are expected to play in carrying out learning tasks as well as the social and interpersonal relationships between participants”.

The Task-based Approach assigns a heavy role to learners. They are required to be responsible, self-confident, inventive and quite independent.

Drawing on works of some researchers, Nunan encourages learners to explore and apply a series of strategies as:

* Finding your own way of learning
* Organising information about language
* Being creative
* Making your own opportunities
1. **Teacher roles**

It refers to the part that the teacher is presumed to play in supervising language learning tasks and the kind relationship s/he is supposed to establish with the learners.

Many objectives between advanced to depict the new teacher roles, some of which run as follows: catalyst, consultant, guide, facilitator, participant, observer, learner, and manager of materials.

1. **Setting**

It refers to the classroom arrangements specified or implied in the task, and also requires consideration of whether the task is to be carried out wholly or partly outside the classroom. Nunan (1989, p. 91) also distinguishes between two kinds of learning: ‘mode’ and ‘environment’. The former refers to the type of task: individual, pair, or group work; and the latter refers to the place where learning takes place like a classroom, a language centre, a community class, or any occupational environment (pp. 92-93)

**2.4 Criteria for Task Selection and Design**

The selection of appropriate tasks requires the establishment of a range of criteria against which tasks may be judged, measured and distinguished from other activities. Candlin (1987) proposed many, some of which are listed below:

* To promote attention to meaning, purpose, and negotiation.
* To enhance attention to input data.
* To conform to learner needs.
* To offer different activities for the same task.
* To allow for different solutions depending on available learner strategies.
* To further learner involvement.
* To encourage metacommunication and metacognition.
* To enhance noticing, consciousness, and awareness.
* To promote risk-taking, problem-sensing and problem solving.
* To involve language use in carrying out a task.
* To provide monitoring and feedback of the learner and the task.
* To ensure co-evaluation by the teacher and the learner of the task and its performance.

**2.5 A Typology of Communicative Tasks**

Pica, Kanagy and Falodun (1993, p. 20-31) generated a typology of five communicative task types:

**2.5.1 The jigsaw Task**

This type of tasks comes to refer to the category of tasks where two interactants do not hold the totality of information, and are obliged to request and supply the information necessary for the completion of the task. The jigsaw is two-way, convergent task which is most likely to promote “comprehension, feedback and interlanguage modification processes”.

**2.5.2 The Information Gap Task**

It refers to a situation in which one interactant holds the information that the other does not possess, but needs to have it through request to complete the task. Information gap is considered as a convergent task because the interactants are supposed the same goals

**2.5.3 The Problem Solving Task**

This task provides interactants with shared access to the information which is necessary for task completion and solving a particular problem. Since the task is targeted towards a single resolution of outcome, interactants are supposed to request and supply information in an intelligible way.

**2.5.4 The Decision-making Task**

In this type of tasks, though interactants have a range of available outcome options, they are expected to converge towards any single decision. Each interactant has access to the information needed, and is ready to supply it when requested by others. Generally, learners are asked to make up their minds and reach a consensus about various human dilemmas.

**2.5.5 The Opinion-exchange Task**

It includes a series of classroom activities which involve participants in conversation, discussion and exchange of ideas. The interactants may end up with the divergent opinions with which they started their work.