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Activities for Task-Based Learning

Integrating a fluency first approach into the ELT classroom

Neil Anderson
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DELTA Publishing

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Dedication and acknowledgements
We would like to dedicate this book to our friend and mentor, Steve Oakes.
We'd also like to thank all the students and trainees who have willingly participated in and given feedback on our ideas.
Neil Anderson would above all like to thank Katy, Alex and Leo for their unwavering patience and support.
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Preface

It is now 40 years since N.S. Prabhu began his innovative research into task-based language teaching in Bangalore, India. Since then, task-based learning (TBL) has become established as one of the best-known and most researched approaches within the communicative language teaching movement, and supported by a number of prominent theorists and researchers in the second language acquisition literature (notably Rod Ellis, Michael Long and Peter Skehan). Yet, despite the plethora of research on TBL, and the theoretical arguments offered in support of it, it is notable how few practical resources exist to support teachers interested in experimenting with TBL in their own classrooms. For this reason, **Activities for Task-Based Learning** is a very welcome addition to the teacher's library, one that I suspect will become a well-thumbed favourite in staff rooms around the world.

As they point out in their introduction to the book, the authors adopt a 'wider conception' of TBL without overlooking the sometimes complex theory that underpins it. As well as many activities that would fall under the narrower definitions of 'real world' tasks argued for by Long (2015), **Activities for Task-Based Learning** also includes a range of classroom practice activities that nonetheless 'allow the learners to flex their communicative muscles', as the authors put it, using language *meaningfully* and for *communicative* purposes, a key intention of Prabhu's original work (1987). **Activities for Task-Based Learning** includes a structural index to allow teachers who work within the constraints of a grammar syllabus (common in many parts of the world) to make use of the activities through what Ellis has called 'focused tasks' – tasks designed to practice a specific language point. These have been shown to lead to significant learning when used within a 'task-supported' approach to language teaching (Li, Ellis & Zhu, 2016), comparing favourably even to unfocused tasks of the kind that Long (2015) argues for.

Perhaps the biggest challenge in writing a books of tasks for the classroom, a challenge that the authors have, in my opinion, met well, is to compile tasks that do not prescribe a single language structure, but allow for students to interact meaningfully to complete the tasks using structures at different levels of proficiency (see their discussion of **5a Nostalgia story** in the Introduction). The key advantage of such activities for us teachers is their flexibility – we can keep coming back to them again and again, from intermediate to advanced levels of proficiency, meaning they become staples among practitioner communities.

I look forward to trying out some of the tasks in **Activities for Task-Based Learning** in my own classroom, and thank the authors heartily for their contribution to the DELTA Publishing Ideas in Action series!

Jason Anderson
Series Editor: Ideas in Action

Activities for Task-Based Learning

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Introduction to task-based learning

Education, including language education, has become ever more student-centred over the past five decades. These changes have followed research findings about child and adult language development, cognitive processes and motivation. In language teaching, we now understand much more than we did about the natural developmental processes referred to as language acquisition, both as regards the learning of a first and second (or subsequent) language. In the pedagogical literature, one approach that is robustly supported by research is task-based learning (TBL), which is referred to in the literature on Second Language Acquisition as task-based language teaching (TBL).

TBL has been one ingredient in various course materials, but there has always been a lack of a single go-to resource both for varied and motivating classroom tasks, and for practical tips regarding teachers' interventions. We decided to write this book in order to address this need. It provides a collection of meaningful tasks, and offers suggestions both about specific "emergent" language that might arise during tasks, and about how this language might best be captured and put to use.

1. A brief history of task-based language teaching

The beginnings of a genuinely task-based approach in ELT are usually traced to N.S. Prabhu's Bangalore Project on which he worked between 1979 and 1984. This project was seminal because, in order to make English lessons appeal to the young people in the state secondary schools for which he was responsible for overseeing, Prabhu chose tasks as the basis of his syllabus, rather than the structural approach current at the time. He admits that he did this as a deliberate attempt to put principles into practice and reported his findings in his book Second Language Pedagogy (1987). The fact that the approach became so widely known in the mainstream of ELT is largely due to the work of Jane and Dave Willis in writing and presenting about TBL, beginning with the seminal **A Framework For Task-Based Learning** (1996). More recently, Mike Long has summed up an immense amount of scholarship relevant to TBL in his 2015 book **Second Language Acquisition and Task-Based Language Teaching**. At the same time there has been a steady growth in the number of coursebooks, both in general English and in ELT for specific contexts, which have included tasks as a key feature of each teaching unit, though conspicuously without using these as an organising principle.

What is a task?

A task-based syllabus puts the **achievement of communicative tasks** at the centre of what students have to do in the classroom. The easiest way to define a task is that it is something that students do as part of their everyday lives, and for which they need the second language. Tasks should be **purposeful**, and engage your students in **real communication**, by which we mean that other **participants** in the tasks will **have a genuine reason to listen** to whoever is speaking.

> A task is something that students do as part of their everyday lives…
> Tasks should be purposeful and engage your students in real communication…

For the purpose of this book, we take a wide view of what a task can be – from participating in a job interview to giving a short presentation; from playing a game to designing parts of an advertising campaign. We hope that the tasks will also be engaging on a personal level, and fun.

Examples of classroom tasks with which readers may already be familiar are:

- versions of a well-known activity **Alibi**, in which students have to invent a story which will "match" as closely as possible with that of a partner to prove (under close questioning) they were not present at an imaginary crime scene;
- classroom surveys, in which students generate questions and poll the class in order to find who, for example, are the biggest shopaholics or the most health-conscious people in the class;
- an activity where students draw a time-line based on the important events in their lives, and then in pairs complete a blank time-line for a partner based on the events they are told about. They then look for similarities between their life stories.

2. Key principles of task-based learning

- TBL is a **student-centred** pedagogy. It is based on the belief that language learning should be helping students to say (better) what they want to say in English. Meaning is primary. Students are not given other people's meanings to regurgitate. Instead, a task encourages students to share *their* opinions; *their* experiences; *their* solutions to problems. Skehan, P. (2004).

… the best tasks … necessitate communication; students work together to reach a concrete outcome, such as solving a problem, comparing experiences, or creating something.

- TBL **prioritises meaning** because this is what language is ultimately *for.* It is important to make the distinction between meaning things in English, and simply rehearsing grammar structures, for whatever else the communicative approach may be, it is precisely this conception of language that is at its core.
- **Accuracy develops out of fluency** and not the other way round: TBL is a **fluency first** approach. This has also been described by Patsy Lightbown and Nina Spada as a "get it right in the end" approach, and elsewhere as *using* a language in order to *learn* it – rather than the obverse! This approach holds that language is best learned within the context of communicative events because it is through having to manipulate language forms in order to express personal meanings that these forms become salient, and in the end memorable, for students. **Fluency-based stages**, which many teachers think of as the most engaging part of lessons, **come early on in the timeline of the lesson**. The focus on specific language forms comes later. Teaching is most effective when the teacher follows the students' lead by attending to and providing feedback on **emergent language.**
- Tasks are **social and physical**. This is because language is profoundly social. Of particular importance in language acquisition are the interactions between students themselves; between the students and the teacher who is able to "scaffold" the learning process; and between the student and the wider linguistic community that she is seeking to be a part of. A more radical but entirely plausible view is that, in addition to this, language is actually embodied; paralinguistic features such as facial expressions are an essential part of communication. Watching people gesturing frantically while talking on a handless phone set to someone who can't see them offers evidence for this. (For a discussion of this idea, see Thornbury, S. 2013.) This is why the best tasks are designed in such a way that they necessitate communication; students work together to reach a concrete outcome, such as solving a problem, comparing experiences, or creating something.

> "A presentation methodology is based on the belief that out of accuracy comes fluency. A task-based methodology is based on the belief that out of fluency comes accuracy, and that learning is prompted and refined by the need to communicate." Willis D. (1990) The Lexical Syllabus in Scott Thornbury's **30 Language Teaching Methods** (2017: 64)

For example, in our **5a Nostalgia story** task, students first prepare and then share stories about past experiences; they are then exposed through a teacher model to the range of forms they could have

used (including ones they may not have e.g. *used to*/*would* for past habit), and analyse these, before preparing to repeat their stories with a new partner, and with more attention to the use of a wider variety of forms. (A pre-intermediate student may now try to incorporate *used to* into their repertoire; an upper intermediate may now try to incorporate *would* into theirs.)

- All this means that tasks should ideally be **authentic**. There ought to be some **relationship between a task and real-world activities**, whether this is more instrumental (e.g. a job interview) or more functional (e.g. comparing, listing, evaluating) – see the list of communicative situations below in section 3.

What about grammar?

We realise that the reality of much teaching is that most teachers operate with a course book with a **structure-based syllabus**, and that many students expect lessons to have a focus on discrete items. For the benefit of these teachers, **we have provided with each task a list of language items** (grammar, vocabulary, functional exponents) which are likely to arise as students do the tasks, and ideas about how and when to focus on language. Note that the tasks are cross-referenced to a list of the most common language items in the index. (NB the language items accompanying each task are meant as a guide and are not supposed to be exhaustive.)

Meanwhile, the advantage (for the busy teacher) is that, precisely because they are not primarily structure-based, the tasks here can be easily adapted for different levels. A teacher who re-uses any of the tasks will gain from this experience as they become more familiar with the language items that emerge naturally during the task performance. (See **emergent language** in the glossary.)

3. How do I choose tasks for my learning context?

In ELT, there has been some controversy about what constitutes a task for teaching purposes, as writers see different aspects as being essential.

According to what we might call a narrow conception of TBL, the tasks set for the students must be decided after a process of in-depth needs analysis. By means of questionnaires, an analysis of the contexts in which they need to use English, and standardised tests, students' subjective needs (as they perceive them) and objective needs (determined by the situations in which they need to use English) are identified. The menu of tasks will then reflect as much as possible how the students need to use the language for their purposes. It is hard to disagree with the pedagogic principles at work here – an ideal menu of tasks would be free from coursebook materials, and once sequenced in terms of perceived difficulty, this would constitute the syllabus in its own right.

Some examples of how language is used in natural communicative situations, referred to in discourse theory as **functions**, are:

- asking questions
- reporting an event in the past
- talking about the way one used to be
- talking about future plans
- comparing and contrasting. See Finocchiaro, M., Brumfit, C. (1983)

Differing from this narrow view is a wider conception of tasks, briefly mentioned above. This includes the kind of pedagogic tasks that have been mentioned – that is, various classroom activities (games, role-plays, interviews, "speed-dating" etc.) which, despite not being drawn directly from real world contexts such as business and academic life, nonetheless resemble real-life situations and allow the students to flex their communicative muscles. (Incidentally, it's worth noting that Prabhu's conception of tasks was even wider, including both rule-focused and form-focused activities!)

"The games (s) play, the problems they solve, the experiences they share, may or may not be the things that they will do in real life, but their use of language, because it is purposeful and real, will replicate features of language use outside the classroom." Willis & Willis (1996)

While we are aware that this is a compromise position, we have ensured that the tasks remain emphatically student-centred in that they are fun, communicative, and relevant to students' needs. Many of them reflect the kind of functions listed above. They all enable students to produce a wide variety of language forms in the performance of the task, and these language forms can be focused on after the task in various ways – or not at all, if you are uncomfortable with the idea of explicit language instruction.

Finally, as part of each task, we have included short sections on how to vary the subject matter or the design. This is so that you can match tasks as far as possible to the interests and language needs of your particular students.

4. Research evidence supporting a task-based approach

"What we know about language learning strongly suggests the primacy of meaning negotiation supported by a focus on form, as proposed by TBLT."
Klapper, J., & Rees , (2003). Reviewing the case for explicit grammar instruction in the university foreign language learning context. Language Teaching Research, 7(3), 285–314.

From Mike Long – Long M., **In Defense of Tasks and TBLT: Nonissues and Real Issues**, *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics,* 36 (2016) CUP

As pointed out in the introductory section above, task-based language teaching is well supported by research findings from **Second Language Acquisition (SLA).** This is largely because it primarily **learner-driven** in terms of the language which arises – that is, it follows the **student's "internal syllabus"** rather than the pre-determined syllabus of a book publisher. Ever since Larry Selinker introduced the key concept of **interlanguage** in 1972, teachers have been made aware of the existence of (more or less) fixed developmental sequences in language acquisition. Researchers have always disagreed about the value of instruction, but an important consensus emerges: instruction can expedite the acquisition process, but appears to do little to alter the sequence in which structures are acquired.

Related to this is the fact that TBL engages both the conscious and unconscious processes at work in language learning, and allows plenty of scope for the unconscious processes to operate, which seem to be more involved in learning than they are sometimes given credit for.

"Instruction is successful which recruits temporary episodes of explicit learning as an aid to subsequent implicit processing."

Mike Long, **Second Language Acquisition and Task-Based Language Teaching** (2015) p.50

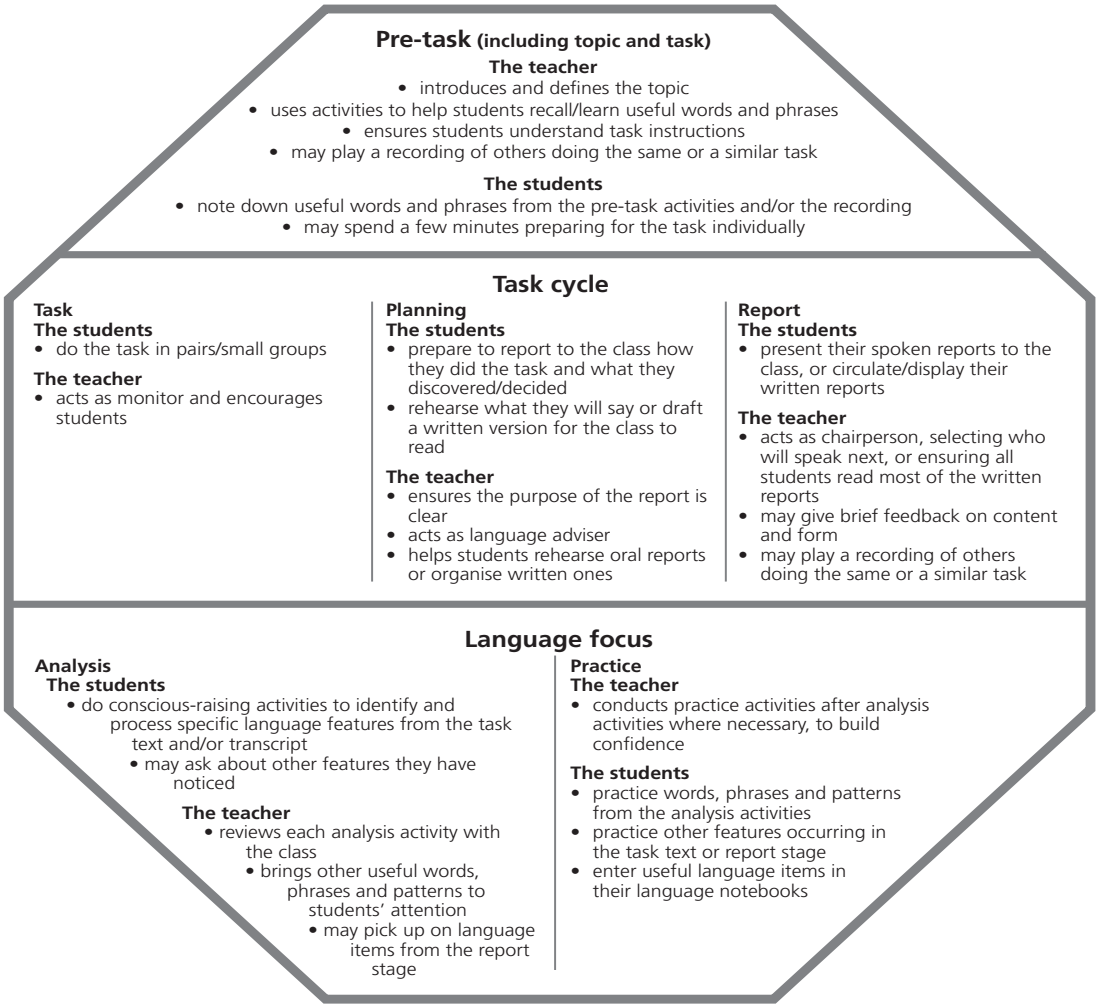
In the history of SLA research, a distinction is frequently drawn between **implicit** and **explicit learning**. The former is, according to Mike Long, "learning without awareness of what is learned" and can often occur **incidentally,** that is, when the student is paying attention to something else, and simply attends to words and structures as they arise in context, rather than focusing on them consciously outside the stream of communication. Because this is the way we learn our first language, it must be true that the overwhelming majority of language learning happens in this way; Long calls it the "default process".

Explicit learning, by contrast, is **intentional** and conscious. This is the kind of learning that happens in typical classroom situations when second (or first) language students are asked to focus on certain structures or vocabulary items; commit words and phrases to memory; and engage in accuracy-focused practice.

The relationship between implicit and explicit learning in second language acquisition is still not wholly understood. According to Rod Ellis (2015: 285-288) the combination of both appears to be a good thing. This is because the two types of learning help students to develop *implicit* knowledge of language, which is the type needed in situations where students are called upon to be fluent. Of course, instruction will certainly add to a student's explicit knowledge, which enables accuracy in situations where a more careful style is required, for example in examinations. Recent research suggests that the effects of implicit learning may be longer lasting.

In the weaker version of communicative language teaching that has come to dominate much of the ELT industry, grammatical syllabuses, which prioritise explicit learning, never really lost their hold probably because they are easier for publishers to package and sequence. Doing more TBL in class will help to redress the balance between the two types of learning, since the tasks clearly provide plenty of opportunity at different points in the cycle for implicit learning, while not neglecting an explicit focus on language. Furthermore, a teacher following a more task-based approach need not impose any artificial sequence of structures; judging the challenge level inherent in the task itself is all that is required.

In her 1996 book, Jane Willis cites the following factors as being important features of good tasks: exposure, motivation, use and instruction.



Willis, J. 1996. A framework for task-based learning. For more recent ideas on Task-based Learning and free lesson plans visit www.willis-elt.co.uk and see Willis, D. and Willis, J. 2007. Doing Task-based Teaching. Oxford University Press. For the theories behind this Framework, see Willis, D. and Willis, J. 2010.
'Six propositions in search of a methodology: applying linguistics to task-based language teaching' in S. Hunston & D. Oakey (eds) *Introducing Applied Linguistics: Concepts and Skills* Routledge.

a) Exposure

> "Anything that increases the amount of exposure, use, time or attention to vocabulary is likely to increase learning." (Schmidt, 2008, in **Nation, Learning Vocabulary in Another Language**, 2013: 102)

In our opinion, the case for the benefits of exposing language learners to a large amount of language is uncontroversial.

The argument for the **importance of exposure (also called comprehensible input)** to language acquisition has been made most consistently by Stephen Krashen, and in the past decade, ISP Nation and Michael Hoey have both argued that acquiring a range of vocabulary, including how to use this, depends on repeated exposure to lexical items, and this is best if the items are encountered in an authentic context. All this is equally true of structures. In the task cycle, seen above, there is exposure to language throughout, but it especially through the use of texts (short articles, recordings) and teachers' models of tasks in the pre-task phase of the cycle that students will be exposed to good quality language, including **authentic** language. For this reason, we have included short recordings and written text with certain tasks in this book, such as the fact files in the tasks **3e FutureTech** and **2c Dangerous animals**. These may be used just as they are, or may prompt teachers with ideas for their own texts. In addition, students will get useful input in plenary stages, when students report back to the whole class.

b) Use

Exposure to the language is not sufficient to bring about a good command of the language (at native and near-native levels) and therefore must be balanced by **opportunities for output**. Being in communicative situations, unmediated by an instructor, but where students must **negotiate meaning,** forces them to pay attention in many cases to formal structures in the language. This idea is mostly associated with Mike Long's Interaction Hypothesis, developed in the 1980s.

Having practice opportunities helps to make these structures – especially more complex ones – automatic, and also helps students to develop an explicit awareness of when to use them.

There are opportunities for students to use language naturally throughout the task cycle, primarily of course to do the tasks themselves, but also in a more careful style in the **reporting back (content feedback)** stage that follows. It is at these moments that students will, at first independently of the teacher, have the opportunity to focus on form, because they offer affordances for feedback from other students (during the task).

There are also opportunities for discussion in the pre-task stage, and we have drawn the reader's attention to these wherever they arise – for example, the controversial judicial decision in **2a Crime and punishment**.

> "The responses that learners receive when meaning is negotiated… delivers feedback to the learner at the most propitious moment. The feedback arises when meaning is problematic, and when the learner is thought to be most receptive. In addition, it is likely to be personalised, since… what will happen naturally will be the provision of useful information on precisely the area of language that the learner is struggling with."
>
> (Skehan, 2003 Task-Based Instruction in **Language Teaching 36** here reporting the findings of Long – and Pica, 1994)

c) Motivation

The role of affect in language learning has been recognised as important in Communicative Language Teaching at least since the late 1960s. From the work of scholars such as Carl Rogers, Earl Stevick and Zoltan Dörnyei, we know that affective factors are among the greatest predictors of success in a second language. Teachers understand that enjoyment of lessons is not an "add-on" but something that will likely lead to more autonomous learning, multiplying the opportunities for exposure and language use – through independent study and extra-curricular engagement with the L2 community, face to face or online.

Willis mentions that one reason why studying language through tasks is motivating is because it has a "high surrender value", i.e. with only a few lessons, they will have developed confidence with communicating in the language, albeit with inaccuracies. (Willis, Dave & Jane 2007:31)

In addition, if tasks are intrinsically motivating, students are more likely to enter that enviable state of "flow" that happens when one is absorbed in something that is optimally challenging, being neither too easy nor too difficult. This is the kind of feeling that seasoned runners describe, or that rises in an experienced musician improvising on stage – or in a child constructing a sand castle. Flow is often cited in motivational and self-help manuals as being not just a stepping stone on the road to happiness, but constitutive of it. (Csikszentmihaly, Mihaly)

We believe that language learning should be a happy experience wherever possible, and to this end we have dedicated sections for tasks to do with sharing personal information; creative tasks; and problems to solve, which we hope will be intrinsically motivating and enjoyable, especially when adapted with the interests of particular students in mind.

d) Instruction

This is where the students' attention is drawn explicitly to features of the language.

In case there was any doubt about the value of L2 instruction, Norris & Ortega, (2000) in a **meta-analysis** of studies into language acquisition, concluded that:

- it makes a difference.
- the observed effect is substantial.
- explicit types of instruction can be more successful than implicit types of instruction.

One well-known estimate for how much of a language course should be dedicated to explicit instruction is 25%. See Nation, I.S.P. (2013).

> "For most learners, the use of feedback may constitute the most potent source of improvement in target language development." Chaudron (1988) in **Second Language Classrooms: Research on teaching and learning**.

The teacher may provide some formative feedback during the task (i.e. on-the-spot correction and vocabulary support) and is strongly encouraged to provide more deliberate, focused feedback on student language in the latter phases of the cycle, which is a dedicated language-focused stage.

5. How and when should the teacher focus on language?

Feedback on students' language can include both peer feedback and targeted expert feedback from the teacher. The attempt to create, or formalise, the "aha!" moments that occur during the performance of tasks is known as **focus on form (FonF).**

For decades, it has been accepted as important that the form focus is linked closely to meaning. Patsy Lightbown notes that Focus on Form is more likely to be effective "at the moment when students know what they want to say, indeed are trying to say something, and the means to say it more correctly is offered to them". Obviously, within a fluency-first approach, there are plenty of opportunities for this to happen. Very often the FonF takes the form of reactive **recasts** – on-the-spot corrected or upgraded reformulations of what a student is trying to say.

e.g. Student: "The stage was destructed."
Teacher: "Really? Was it completely destroyed?"

According to Mike Long (2015: 55) these recasts are effective because
- they are immediately relevant to what students are trying to say.
- there is a joint attentional focus on the message, and the language "code".
- the student's attentional resources have been freed up, the message having been delivered.
- the student is invested in the exchange; it is relevant for her.

These explicit teaching moments, while they share several features of conventional clarification, are different in several important ways. The focus is often reactive, rather than pre-determined, and will typically deal with a range of items, rather than being restricted to one limited grammatical focus. These interventions will often be short.

"A key characteristic of focus on form, negative feedback, and **expansions** of various kinds, however, is that they are reactive, supplied in harmony with a learner's current developmental readiness to learn." Long M., In **Defense of Tasks and TBLT: Nonissues and Real Issues**, *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics,* 36 (2016)

In the case of a task such as **3a How strict were your parents?** the focus on the anticipated emergent language (verb complementation: *make, let, allow, force, encourage*, *ask, tell, want somebody (to)+ V;* and vocabulary *be allowed to* etc.) could come initially with the questionnaire, and in more depth after the teacher/proficient speaker's model, later on in the sequence.

In the task **7b Decon-Recon***,* the focus on language comes when students compare their version of the deconstructed text with the original – this comparison between their version and the target model is said to promote **noticing** of linguistic gaps between their output and the target model. See Long M. (2015).