Tasks in Textbooks: Barking up the Wrong Tree?

A paper presented at the 3rd Biennial Conference on Task-based Language Teaching, Lancaster University, UK, 13-16 September 2009.

Alan Waters,
Lancaster University

Rationale

- Increasing focus on pedagogy of language learning tasks (e.g., Van den Branden 2006, Carless 2007, Samuda & Bygate 2008)
- BUT mainly still 'laboratory' investigations and application of theoretical models (Bygate, Norris & Van den Branden 2009)
- Also need 'bottom-up' studies which theorise from practice of typical language teaching situation (cf. Waters 2009b)

The study (1): focus & research questions

- Textbooks as 'entrée' into world of everyday language teaching
- Research questions:
  - What role do tasks play in ELT textbooks?
  - To what extent does the picture resemble or differ from the one in applied linguistics in general, and why?
  - What implications might there be for further research and theorising in this area?

The study (2): scope

- Textbooks focused on = *Headway, Cutting Edge, Innovations, Language to Go* and *Lifelines*, i.e., series produced by major UK publishers -> availability & familiarity
- BUT most textbooks local
- Intermediate level only -> convenience and 'representativeness'
- Picture at other levels?
- Analysis = 'on paper' only, vs. classroom use

The study (3): definition of 'task'

- Numerous lists of numerous 'candidates' (e.g., those in Bygate, Skehan & Swain 2001, Ellis 2003)
- 'An activity which involves a primary focus on using language as communication, i.e., one intended to achieve some kind of purpose over and above displaying a knowledge of the language as an end in itself.'
- Term often missing/misapplied in textbooks -> focus on function of textbook element

---

Findings (1)

- 'False positives', e.g., *Headway* (Soars & Soars 2003), Unit 4, p. 34 'What do you think?'; p. 33, 'Practice': item 4; p. 108: item 5.
- Interpretation often problematic -> role usually multi-dimensional
- Close matches, e.g., 'Get Talking' (Ex. 8) in Unit 4, *Language to Go* (Crace & Wileman 2002) - also see, e.g., Hutchinson 1997: 26, item 5; Cunningham & Moor 1999: 42-43; Dellar et al. 2004: 51, item 8.

Findings (2)

- Other purposes of 'Get Talking' task: links to earlier exercises
1. Task language:
   - Ex. 1: phrasal verbs for describing typical events in a tour; Exs. 3 – 5: structure of a 'model' itinerary; Exs. 6 & 7: use of present tense forms for talking about the future.
2. Task content:
   - Ex. 2: Talking about familiar journeys; Exs. 3 – 5: touring parts of London via Thames; Exs. 6 & 7: 'carrier content' related to day trip theme.
- Cf. Hutchinson 1997: 26, item 5; Cunningham & Moor 1999: 42–43; Dellar et al. 2004: 51, item 8.

Findings (3): the emergent picture

- Task as means of drawing together discrete language and content strands of earlier part of learning unit in order to provide opportunity to apply them in holistic manner (see Fig. 1).
- Task defined by pedagogic role in sequence of other items is related to.
- Resembles 'task-supported learning' (TSL), vs. 'task-based learning' (TBL) (Ellis 2003: 28–34), BUT…

Findings (4): a 'task-enhanced' approach

- The term 'TSL' implies task plays pivotal role, other elements have only auxiliary role

- But data indicate relationship other way round (cf. Waters 2009a), i.e., it is the rest of the unit which supports the task

- Thus 'task-*enhanced* learning' (TEL) a more appropriate term: the task supplements 'traditional' textbook fare (and is defined in relation to it), not replaces it.

Implications for applied linguistics

- A more objective definition of 'task'

- Differentiation from 'exercise', 'activity', etc.

- Understanding rationale for textbook treatment of tasks can create potential for greater relevance -> Why are tasks incorporated into textbooks in manner shown?

The rationale for TEL

1. Lack of awareness of benefits of TBL by publishers, authors, teachers, etc?
2. TEL a better fit in terms of typical 'situational constraints' (see, e.g., Carless 2002, 2004, 2007): majority of its methodology more feasible in 'TESEP' (Holliday 1994) settings
3. TEL and the 'out of class' context:
   - Textbooks provide visible representation of curriculum (Hutchinson & Hutchinson 1996)
   - In TBL/'focus on form', syllabus emergent, retrospective; in TEL/'focus on forms', syllabus explicit, prospective
   - Latter more suited for textbook as 'route map'
   (etc.)

Conclusion

- Task use in textbooks a product of need for compatibility with defining features of typical language teaching situation
- Study of textbook use of tasks can raise awareness of how to make them work effectively in mainstream language teaching (cf. Waters 2009a)
- Also helps 'R & D' become more 'bottom up', i.e., more rooted in and able to build more on typical existing practice (cf. Waters 2009b)