

Implementational Demands in Task-Based Teaching: The Teachers' Perspective

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Abstract

This case study investigated how five novice teachers of French went about implementing tasks. In particular, the investigation aimed at finding out about implementational demands that imposed challenges for the teachers and how they coped with these challenges. The study also looked at the complementary relationship between implementational demands and task design factors and how these impact teacher behavior and the learner's engagement. The data collection took place over the period of one academic year and involved observational data and information elicited from interviews. The results revealed a range of challenges that teachers face when implementing tasks. Some of these issues had to do with the learning and implementing of task routines, others with understanding task designs and managing task conditions. Student engagement and frequent task breakdowns were most often found with tasks that required the processing of larger amount of linguistic content during group work, and when the teacher played the primary role as the facilitator of learning. The article concludes with some suggestions on how to offset the implementational demands in curriculum design and teacher training.

1 Introduction

For the past two decades, communicative and task-based language teaching (TBLT) has been attracting researchers, teacher trainers, material developers, and the field of SLA. An evolving body of research providing evidence for the effectiveness of task-based learning has further led curriculum designers and textbook writers to develop materials that increasingly use tasks as the building blocks of instruction. While the majority of research in TBLT has focused on the role of tasks and task types, investigating which design characteristics maximize learner engagement, an area of research that still remains underexplored is the teacher, whose role is crucial in realizing the potential of tasks. As Samuda (2001) points out, the role between task and teacher is essentially complementary, in which the role of the task is to provide an opportunity for language processing, and the role of the teacher to guide learners towards the types of language processing believed to support L2 development. How do novice teachers go about implementing tasks? Which demands do they find challenging? How do they cope with these demands and how does it affect learner behavior? These questions are the focus of this research article.

2 Literature Review

Although TBLT has been in practice for several decades, only little research exists that has investigated the implementation of a task-based syllabus as a whole or how teachers adapt to the

teaching of tasks (see Van den Branden, 2006; Lopez, 2004). Some studies, which have looked at how experienced teachers feel about utilizing TBLT for the first time, show mixed results. On the one hand teachers have been found to react positively, as it took the task of developing syllabuses off their hands (Van den Branden, 2006). On the other hand, teachers also have been reported to feel anxious and become reactive when things do not work out (Lopez, 2004). For example, Duran (1994) observed that teachers often did not choose to use the new task-based materials or use them only selectively, and interspersed their syllabus regularly reverting to traditional approaches. Van den Branden (2006) attributes such behavior to student performance that does not live up to a teacher's expectation, which often gives rise to confusion and tension, and when new methodologies do not match practices with which teachers are familiar.

Research has also suggested that teachers often struggle with task-related issues (see Watzke, 2007; Samuda, 2001). One issue that has been repeatedly pointed out has to do with task complexity and being able to assess task difficulty. As suggested by Linsen (1994), teachers often have a tendency to interpret tasks as too difficult. In her study, she found that teachers often manipulated tasks by oversimplifying task procedures or changing the task itself, in particular when they anticipated that their students would not be able to cope with the tasks. For instance, the teachers in her study simplified the vocabulary in a text or asked the students to fill in only one word instead of writing complete sentences. Others left the task unchanged but modified the original way in which it was to be implemented. The example that she provides states that some teachers stretched the introduction phase by explaining all difficult words in the text before the students were allowed to read it. In another study, done by Timmermans (2005, cited in Van den Branden, 2006), experienced teachers were found to readapt reading tasks, originally designed as silent readings, in favor of the more traditional strategies that ask students to read a text out loud and line by line because they were concerned their students would not be able to understand the material when reading silently and alone.

When looking at task complexity, some practitioners have suggested that the role of the teacher should be the one of a mediator who needs to lead from behind (see Samuda, 2001; Van den Branden, 2006; Willis, 1996). Empirical research that has investigated this issue, however, is very rare. One such study conducted by Samuda (2001) reports, after following an experienced teacher for one semester, that in the case of more complex tasks, a significant amount of teacher intervention was needed to wean learners away from simpler expressions of modal meaning ("maybe", "it is possible") and towards the use of modal verbs.

Besides challenges in assessing task difficulties, other task-related issues that have been found to cause feelings of uneasiness with some teachers have to do with group work and allowing students to work individually (see Van den Branden, 2006). A number of studies reveal that teachers do not like group work and only hesitatingly introduce it in their classrooms (Hillewaere, 2000; Linsen, 1994). Arguments given are that the classroom becomes noisy, learners are disorganized and lower proficiency students do not participate. Van den Branden (2006) also believes that some teachers resist adapting to group tasks and individual student work because they do not like to give up control. He draws this conclusion from teachers changing group work into lock step activities or who had a tendency to interfere with their students' silent reading constantly in order to check their students' comprehension (see Duran, 1994).

3 The study

The central focus of this study was to investigate how novice teachers go about implementing tasks. We asked the following questions: Which demands do they find challenging? How do they cope with these demands and how does it affect learner behavior and engagement?

This study was motivated by several reasons. First, the French program at a large research university in the Northwest of the United States had recently piloted a newly developed task-based syllabus for one quarter, and was about to embark on implementing this syllabus with novice language TAs. This involved training teachers in the implementation of task-based instruction. Second, little research exists that investigates teachers' behavior in implementing tasks in intact

classroom settings, how do they interpret task designs and purposes, issues they are struggling with when learning how to teach with tasks, and how they adapt to task-based teaching over the course of one year.

3.1 Participants and selection

Five novice teachers of French participated in the study. The participants were enrolled in the French graduate program and had been assigned a first-year French language class at random, which is common practice in the department. The group consisted of two women and three men who were between 23 and 26 years of age. Two were native speakers of French, two of English, and one of Russian. None of them had any prior teaching experience, with the exception of one, who had taught English conversation in France for one year.

3.2 TBLT syllabus and materials

The syllabus and materials (see Appendix A for an example of task designs and sequence) used in this study presented a strong form of a task-based syllabus (see Skehan, 1996). The syllabus and materials were based on Rond-point (Flumian, Labascoule, Lause, & Royer, 2007). Each chapter specified the functional objectives (e.g. presenting and identifying a person), the grammar topic (e.g. feminine and masculine articles), and vocabulary content (e.g. numbers 1–12). The grammar rules were described and embedded within the chapters, and the vocabulary items listed at the end of the book.

3.3 Training

None of the participants had received any training in language teaching prior to their joining the graduate program. All participants participated in a one-week long pre-service training, during which they received a general introduction to the French language program. During fall quarter 2006, all TAs were also required to attend a language teaching methods course. The course trained the participants in the teaching of a weak and strong form of a task-based syllabus. More specifically, topics addressed included methodological principles underlying TBLT, understanding and differentiating task types and difficulty, and psycholinguistic processes that are operationalized when learners engage in task behavior. The course furthermore introduced the novice teachers to a range of practical strategies on dealing with pre-task preparation, monitoring task performance, and post-task debriefings in the context of teaching different task types.

3.4 Data collection and analysis

The data collection took place over the period of one academic year from Fall 2006 through Spring 2007. The data for this qualitative case study consisted of two types: observational data and information elicited from interviews. Each participant was observed twice each quarter, all together six times. One observation was conducted by the French program coordinator, the second observation by the researcher of this study.

The purpose of the teacher observations was twofold: First, we wanted to see what tasks teachers had chosen, and how and in which sequence they operationalized task procedures. This would give us some information about implementational issues of task-based teaching. Second, we looked at the degree of student engagement during task performance. Research (Good & Beckerman, 1978) has shown that time-on-task or times engaged are dimensions of the instructional process that make significant contribution to student learning. To assess students' level of engagement, we qualified their engagement as either low or high. To qualify as a low engagement, one of the following criteria had to be met: multiple students appeared as lost and

were not engaged, showed only limited ability to perform a task, or a task resulted in breakdown. During each observation, we recorded the task type and the student engagement level.

Given that a variety of factors potentially impact learner engagement such as task design factors, implementational procedures, pre-task preparation, and learner readiness, we wanted to get a better understanding of teacher-related factors that potentially impacted student behavior. For this reason, each class visit was followed up with a 45–60 minute-long interview within two days of the observation. In particular, we focused on those tasks during which students displayed “low engagement”. Here we wanted to find out about the teachers’ rationales for task implementation, their understanding of the task designs, underlying skill components and processes. The interviews had a second purpose as well. We wanted to know if the teachers emphasized any task types in particular, and learn more about their task choices and preferences, and their sequencing strategies in general. All interviews were audio recorded and then later transcribed.

In our final analysis of the observational and interview data, we triangulated teacher-related and implementational issues, student engagement, and task types and designs, to establish if there was a relationship between task factors, implementational demands and student engagement, and if so how these factors affected each other. To further account for teacher growth and change, we compared the teachers’ task implementation strategies during first, second and third quarter. This would allow us to get some understanding about teacher evolvement in task implementation, in particular, which implementational demands remained challenging for the teacher.

4 Summary of findings

The central focus of this study was to investigate which implementational demands imposed challenges for the teacher and how teachers coped with these challenges. We also looked at the complementary relationship between implementational demands and task design factors to see how these impacted teacher behavior and also the learner’s engagement. This dual perspective provides some information that is relevant for curriculum development, task design and teacher training.

An analysis of the observational data showed that student engagement was often found to be low with tasks that required an enhanced involvement of the teacher in the role of a facilitator of learning. Here, by facilitating, it is meant the balancing of the amount of exposure and use of language, ensuring that students were ready to perform the task. Examples were pre-task preparations or set-ups and also tasks that required the teacher to function as a guide, for instance presenting a video-based task that required the learners to draw a real agent’s pathway describing a house. The impact of the teacher’s role became especially important in contrast to students’ performing of tasks that involved students in individual work, and also that had a narrow and closed focus, i.e. involving a reduced focus of linguistic or non-linguistic skills such as underlining past tense forms, making lists, or matching.

By also taking into account task characteristics, the observational data revealed that low student engagement and frequent task breakdowns were most often found with tasks that required the processing of larger amount of linguistic content. In particular, these were tasks that involved the comprehension and retention of numerous details, as it was the case with listening tasks (e.g. answering comprehension questions or drawing a real agent’s pathway describing a house), tasks requiring students to apply a broad range of linguistic skills (e.g. debates), and generally group tasks involving four to six (and more) students.

The follow-up interviews with the teachers on task implementation, their rationales, and also their interpretation of task designs revealed the following information and patterns. The teachers felt overwhelmed by the implementational demands of tasks. This was in particular the case with tasks that embedded a range of small procedural steps. The following teacher’s comment exemplifies this issue:

“OK this is really a complex activity, there is going to be all these stages so I am going to explain you to you in English because it’s going to take half the class otherwise. And I don’t know if it is good or

bad, but this is what I have to do. Some of the *Tâches ciblées* [target tasks] have been very complex, breaking into this group, changing chairs, go and exchange with another group information, returning back, interacting again, ... it is like going through five different stages.”

As a consequence, as several teachers reported, they frequently simplified the teaching process. They did so by either disregarding suggested pedagogical strategies such as following a sequence of sub-steps. In other cases, they modified sub-tasks. One teacher described her implementational strategy in the following way: “When there is something they [students] have to say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ ... that’s where I cut, I usually change that, and they have to discuss it.” Or, as she further mentioned, she often asked students to proceed from reading a text to open discussions directly. Several teachers also reported that they frequently skipped tasks in the book whose procedural steps they found too complicated to implement.

Several tendencies also emerged as patterns on how the teachers dealt with managing group tasks, i.e. making group arrangements and managing student interactions. The teachers pointed out that their intention was usually to follow the suggestions given by the task designers, but admitted that in practice they accepted any kind of group arrangements. The tendency among teachers was to allow students to arrange themselves in groups ranging from three to six students, and also to make decisions with whom they wanted to work. One teacher also reported that he instructed his students to work in groups of at least three, even if a task was designed as pairwork. The teachers described their rationales for dealing with group arrangements in the following way: As one teacher said, “If I use bigger groups, there is at least one somebody who will say something during the group.” Others mentioned group management issues and efficiency reasons. The teachers were also concerned that their students end up with somebody they would not like and that they feel frustrated. Tasks that they perceived as difficult also motivated them to let students pick their own partners. Interestingly, the interviews further revealed that teachers in general were aware if their students were engaged or not, but as some pointed out, they preferred not to intervene, or as others said, they did not know what to do about it.

During the interviews we also investigated the teachers’ understanding of task designs, and their underlying goals. Teachers’ answers showed that teachers were not always clear about the task purpose and arrangement. As one teacher put it, “Sometimes it is hard to understand why [the order of activities vary] from this activity to the other.” Teachers normally referred to task purposes in terms of grammar structures and vocabulary topics. The study further showed that this kind of interpretation impacted teachers’ decisions in task choice and sequencing. For example, as one teacher pointed out, he decided to teach two tasks in sequence because both tasks dealt with animals, although both tasks involved different linguistic and cognitive complexities.

A comparison of teachers’ changes in task implementation over the course of one year showed several changes. The changes were most noticeably in the implementation of task procedural steps. In particular, these included pre-tasks (e.g. preparation tasks and strategies) and post-tasks (e.g. follow-up and direct assessment of student learning). Teachers also adapted their strategies to accommodate learners processing challenges, e.g. in the way they presented video- or audio-based content. These changes show that teachers evolved in their understanding of difficulty factors, i.e. what makes task performance more cognitively complex. The teachers’ implementational practices of group tasks showed little changes and learner engagement was observed as low towards the end of the first-year of instruction.

5 Discussion

The results of this study show a range of challenges that teachers face when implementing tasks. Some of these issues are related to the learning and implementing of task routines, others to managing task conditions. It was in particular in these two areas where a complementary relationship between task design features and implementational demands was observed, and where the effects of implementational demands on learner engagement became noticeable. In the

following section, we will argue that implementational demands affect teacher behavior and potentially also learner engagement.

One of the challenges of TBLT lies in the systematic management of pedagogic processes. For example, pre-task activities involve task preparation such as helping students learn or recall task-related vocabulary and phrases, cuing of grammatical structures, and clarifying and modeling task procedures. During-task teacher behavior involves monitoring and assessing learner performance, and post-task activities may include follow-ups and debriefings. The implementation of tasks also often requires the teachers to keep in mind and pay attention to procedural steps, whose success may depend on a particular sequencing, which is the case with tasks that constitute idiosyncratic routines. Cognitively complex tasks also often require additional planning, adjustments in task procedures, and teacher guidance. The need for attention to details and procedural steps increases the information processing load that teachers face. The increased cognitive demand creates a dilemma in light of limited attentional resources, which can result in a tradeoff, taking away from mental resources needed to focus on learner performance. Given these demands, it comes as no surprise that the teachers coped with some of the implementational demands by simplifying the teaching process and reducing or modifying task procedures that allowed them stay in control. This simplification process, which served teachers well, may have affected learner engagement in a negative way. By manipulating task procedures and by even omitting steps, the teachers may have unwittingly impacted task-processing demands, asked learners to perform tasks for which additional preparation would have been beneficial, and which the original task design as intended by the designer had accounted for.

Ellis (2003) points out: "It is not enough to simply put students into groups to complete a task. What counts is the quality of the interaction, and whether this enables students to engage effectively with the task and support each other's language learning." (p. 269) The teacher plays a crucial role in making this happen. From a theoretical point of view, the teachers need to have an understanding of task design and underlying linguistic and cognitive skill behavior, i.e. learning behaviors in which students are to engage. This is necessary so that teachers can intervene if students engage in task behavior that is different from what is expected. From a pragmatic point of view, it also requires the teacher to make interactive decisions on learner readiness, monitor student performance in an ongoing way to help them keep target skills and goals in focus, and even make potential modifications of task routines. Dealing with such a range of factors presupposes that a teacher is familiar with task routines and feels at ease in implementing these, so that it opens up attentional resources that allows them to focus on learner behavior. At the same time, it also asks for group management skills. It is fair to say that the larger the size of the group and the more complex the task in terms linguistic or cognitive skills that students have to perform, the higher the need for potential teacher interventions may be. Given the range of factors involved in implementing these tasks, it comes as no surprise that learner engagement was lowest. Dealing with such a range of different implementational demands is not only constraining on teachers' resources but also overwhelming, and may likely be one of the most difficult challenges in TBLT to deal with. The fact that after one year of instruction the teachers barely had made any adjustments in their strategies to deal with large group task designs provides further evidence about the implementational demands. Teachers were still struggling and often felt helpless and did not know what to do. What is also noteworthy to mention is how teachers coped with task management demands and student low engagement by allowing them to choose their partners and arrange themselves into groups, hoping this strategy would increase interaction.

6 Implications for teacher training and conclusion

In conclusion, the teachers' self-reported and observed behavior provides some information about implementational demands in TBLT that novice teachers are struggling with. I have also tried to show how the implementational demands not only affects teacher behavior but also learner engagement. Obviously teacher behavior does not account alone for the range of factors that may have contributed to student low engagement. For this reason, this case study analysis makes it

difficult to establish a direct cause and effect relationship between implementational demands and student engagement and learning outcome. To do so a different study design would be necessary. Nevertheless the observational findings and the teachers' reports suggest that there is a complementary relationship between task designs and implementational demands that ultimately also contribute to student engagement. Furthermore, as is the case with all case studies, the number of participants is small such that the findings should not be overgeneralized, although they do add guidance to the field.

This study also raises many questions that warrant further research. To what degree do task conditions such as large group designs impact learner participation, in particular in beginning/intermediate level language classes? Is there a difference between beginning/intermediate and advanced level classes? Due to the communicative demand, do large group designs have an impeding impact on learner engagement rather than provide opportunities for multiple learner interactions that large group designs intend to achieve? To what degree does the need for task management skill enhance the implementational demands in TBLT? How are experienced teachers affected by implementational demands?

The findings of this study have implications for curriculum design and teacher training. The following guidelines provide some suggestions on how to offset the implementational demands in curriculum design and teacher training.

Learning task routines. Task management and control constitute vital components that impact task implementation. Teachers need detailed and intensive practice on pre-task preparation, post-task debriefing, and monitoring task performance. In addition, given that tasks come in a wide range of designs, TBLT requires training that addresses task specific procedural steps. The following teacher's comment, "I try to avoid procedures that involve too much management, telling students to get in this group and then switch to another...", confirms the challenge that many teachers face. In particular, idiosyncratic and complex task designs warrant special attention and training in helping teachers understand theoretical underpinnings as well procedural steps from a pragmatic point of view.

Understanding task designs and cognitive processes. It seems teachers who are new to task-based teaching have a tendency to interpret task designs based on underlying grammar and vocabulary themes. Instead of focusing on cognitive processes, they use vocabulary themes and grammar structures as an organizational principle when arranging their lessons and task sequences. This behavior may interfere with the progression of skill development as intended by the task designers in a prearranged curriculum. For this reason, teachers need training in recognizing and understanding cognitive processes that are evoked by specific task procedures. This also includes cognitive, linguistic, and communicative demands and how to control these processes. Many of such processes are not transparent to beginning language teachers and thus need to be made explicit. Teachers also need to learn about psycholinguistic processes that are operationalized during task-specific behavior and how these affect the acquisition process. They need to be engaged in exploring and analyzing and how sequencing or change in sequencing potentially affects learners' task performance.

Task and curriculum design. It may be a task designer's intention to engineer group tasks involving 4-6 students to ultimately provide for more interaction and thus negotiations among students. In reality, however, and as shown by this study, students do not interact as freely in large groups and as a result only yield low learner engagement. This raises the question about effective group designs and how to maximize learner participation, in particular in low-level language classes. Tasks need to be designed to balance linguistic and cognitive demands while also taking into account the conditions under which the students are to perform. It seems that small group tasks can be more easily managed, and also by their very nature lead to higher student engagement. They also impose less implementational demands, and potentially require less teacher intervention in helping students pay attention to form and meaning. This issue in task design requires more attention to task-based research, in particular for beginning language classes.

In many instances, beginning teachers rely almost exclusively on instructions as provided by task designers or their supervisors. For this reason, novice teachers need to be provided with specific guidelines and detailed task instructions on how to implement different task types. Textbook instructions such as “have students work in groups of 3-5” without further specifying how students are to interact, or how each student is to participate are often too generic. At least initially, such guidance is important, until novice teachers have gained enough experience to modify and adapt (pedagogic) tasks on their own.

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Appendix A

Setting up an address book

The following descriptions (Brandl, 2008, p. 10–11) demonstrate a sequence of tasks as presented in Rond-Point (Flumian, C. at al., 2007).

- Task 1. You are in a language school and the instructor is taking attendance. Students read the names of students and check who is present.

- Task 2. Students listen to their teacher pronounce French names and share with the class French names that they are familiar with.

- Task 3. A. Students match (associate) numbers with twelve photos that represent cultural themes. The photos are marked with some letters from the alphabet.

- Task 3. B. Students count from 1–12.

- Task 4. Students listen to the result of a song contest broadcasted on TV. They complete a chart and write down the points that each country was awarded.

- Task 5. A. Students are asked to write down the names of seven European countries. (The article and the first letter of each country name are provided.) The teacher follows up with the question: How do you spell L'Allemagne?

- Task 5. B. Students locate the names of European countries on the map.

- Task 6. Students express their opinions about where they believe a set of photos was taken. Students work in pairs. For example, one student would ask in French: La photo numéro deux, c'est la France? [Photo number 2, is this France?] Her partner might respond, Non, ce n'est pas la France, je crois que c'est la Grande-Bretagne. [No, it is not France, I believe it is Great Britain.]

- Task 7. Students listen to a recording of first and last names, and compare the spelling. They look for letters that are pronounced the same way, and those that are pronounced differently.

- Task 8. Students match names of famous French celebrities with a corresponding photo and caption. Students express who they believe these people are. For example, a student might say: La photo numéro 1, c'est Marguerite Duras? [Photo number 1, is this Marguerite Duras?] Her partner might respond, Non, ce n'est pas Marguerite Duras, je crois que c'est Isabelle Adjani. [No, it is not Marguerite Duras, I believe it is Isabelle Adjani.]

- Task 9. Step A. Students listen to three different dialogs in which people explain why they are learning French. They have to number the sentences (reasons) to identify who says what.

- Task 9. Step B. Students share their reason for why they are studying French.

- Task 10. Students find out the first and last name, phone number or email address from each other in class.