CHAPTER – 5

A Study of Pedagogical Tasks
5.1 Introduction

Tasks are considered as basic building blocks of any language learning activity from both a language acquisition and a communicative perspective. Basically, task is perceived as the main construct by SLA researchers and language teachers. The entire purpose of a task is to create language learning opportunities and allow the learner to perform in such a way which in/directly parallels the target language use. In task-based learning, tasks are extremely indispensable to learning activity, as they are based on the theory that learners may possibly learn more proficiently if their minds are focused on the task, rather than on the language which they are using.

The chapter is mainly about language learning tasks. It begins with a list of definitions of tasks in language teaching literature. The chapter then discusses the core components that go towards forming up a task, including goals, input data, procedures, activities, teacher and learner roles, and task settings. In the end, it touches upon the classifications of tasks. It also discusses in detail the relationship between real-world and pedagogical tasks.

5.2 Defining Language Learning Tasks

A "task" is a particular term in language teaching but is distinct from language exercise. Task has its specific characteristics, structures and instructional steps. As there are series of tasks in English teaching, however the focal point of all tasks is a way of dealing with a communicative difficulty, which has certain relationships with the real world of learners' lives and learning experience, and which can provoke learners' attention and contribution.

5.2.1 Definitions of Tasks

Task has been described in a variety of ways. Starting from the 1980s up till now, more than twenty definitions of task have been proposed in the literature by different researchers from different research perspectives (e.g., Prabhu, 1987; Bygate, 2001; Ellis, 2000, 2003, 2005; Lee, 2000; Long, 1985, 1991, 1997, 2005; Nunan,
The definition of task has been increasingly developed during the last twenty years through experimental research in classroom implementation. There is a range of different definitions covering everything from the real world to the pedagogical point of views of tasks. They are dissimilar for the reason that they are looked at from different perspectives. Of these numerous definitions of ‘task’ some are listed as follows in a chronological order.

One of the most extensively quoted definitions of task is suggested by Long (1985; cited in Nunan, 2004: 2). He outlines his approach to task-based language teaching in terms of target task and establishes the concept of task as:

a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward. Thus 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, making a hotel reservation, writing a check, finding a street 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.

Long’s tasks (target tasks) at this point are very much related to the real-world activities that people perform in their daily life. In addition, tasks in this definition can be associated to tasks that both apply and do not apply language. For example a task such as painting a fence can be done without the use of language.

Once tasks are transformed from the real world into the classroom, they become pedagogical in nature. Here is a definition of a pedagogical task:

... an activity or action 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 involve the production of language. A task usually requires the teacher to specify what will be regarded as successful completion of the task. The use of a variety 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. (Richards, et al. 1986, cited in Nunan, 2004: 2)

The authors formulate this definition from a communicative and a pedagogical perspective. Here, tasks are portrayed as what the learners will perform within class instead of the world outside the classroom. They also put emphasis on the significance of a non-language outcome.

Tasks in authentic life and pedagogical tasks in the classroom are not completely connected. Since, tasks which are performed in the real world are not necessarily amenable to the teaching situation, because classrooms do not provide the similar situational surroundings as the ‘real world’. Tasks which are applied in the classrooms require the students to do things that increase communicative ability.

From a pedagogical perspective, real world target language tasks may prove to be tough for learners to perform due to potential semantic, pragmatic, lexical and syntactic difficulties. Hence, pedagogical tasks may be described as a bridge to real world tasks.

Breen (1987) defines task from a pedagogical perspective as follows:

... any structured language learning endeavour which has a particular objective, appropriate content, a specified working procedure, and a range of outcomes for those who undertake the task. ‘Task’ is therefore assumed to refer to a range of work plans which have the overall purposes 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. (cited in Nunan, 2004: 3)

Breen’s definition of tasks is extremely wide, but it does not clarify how a task is dissimilar from drills or exercises. According to him, whatever thing a learner performs in the classrooms could be called a task. Nunan (2005) however, remarks that tasks are not identical with practices or activities (cited in Izadpanah, 2010).
Crookes (1986) proposes a classroom perspective on a task defining it as “a piece of work or an activity, usually with a specified objective, undertaken as part of an educational course, or at work” (cited in Sanchez, 2004: 48).

Skehan (1998) proposes the five key characteristics of a task as follows:

1. Meaning is primary.
2. Learners are not given other people’s meaning to regurgitate.
3. There is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities.
4. Task completion has some priority.
5. The assessment of the task is in terms of outcome.

(cited in Nunan, 2004: 3)

As Long (1985), Skehan’s (1998) definition is also focused on the use of real world tasks or activities that are similar to authentic task behaviour. While doing real-world tasks, there is a need for using authentic language to perform these tasks. Further, Skehan (2001) advocates that performance frequently presumes achieving a goal or an objective, or arriving at an outcome or an end product (cited in Sanchez, 2004).

Willis (1996) defines task as “. . . where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome” (cited in Sanchez, 2004: 49). Despite simplicity, the definition given by Willis still does not help to simplify the problem. In this case, the definition of a task may be any of communicative activities, of various types, accessible in textbooks and frequently followed in the classroom.

Combining both meaning and form, Ellis (2003) defines task in a pedagogical way. He defines a task as:

A work plan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed. To this end, it requires them to give primary attention to meaning and to make use of their own linguistics resources, although the design of the task may predispose them to choose particular forms. A task is
intended to result in language use that bears a resemblance, direct or indirect, to the way language is used in the real world. Like other language activities, a task can engage productive or receptive, and oral or written skills and also various cognitive processes. (cited in Nunan, 2004: 3-4)

It seems that the above definition of Ellis’ (2003) is very pedagogical as it gives attention to meaning incorporating grammar in addition to other major points in language teaching, such as inclusion of pragmatic properties, use of authentic language and cognitive process (cited in Izadpanah, 2010).

Finally, another well-known definition is projected by Nunan (2004: 4). He defines a pedagogical task as:

A piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right with a beginning, a middle and an end.

The above mentioned definitions of tasks are somewhat different from each other, but all the definitions emphasize the fact that tasks engage communicative language use where the user’s concentration is mainly focused on meaning rather than grammatical form. Only Nunan’s (2004) and Ellis’ (2003) definitions of a pedagogical task strongly underline the fact that meaning and form are very much interconnected, and grammar does help the language user to convey different communicative meanings.

The definitions of tasks are many which reveal a large number of different points of view. One of the main reasons behind the variation, according to Sanchez, (2004: 49-50) is that scholars do not deal with the subject from the viewpoint of the “nature of the task itself in real life, but rather from specific methodological preconceptions, which act as filters to the further description or definition of the object of study; thus, they end up with different results”.
5.2.2 Role of Tasks in Language Learning

Currently various scholars have expressed the opinion that efficient contribution and full participation in the process of teaching/learning promotes learning. Language learning can be best acquired by meaningful communication, and the manner of making meaningful communication can be created by performing certain tasks. These tasks produce a situation where negotiation of meaning and escalation of language occurs. For that reason, Richards and Rodgers (2001: 223) say that “engaging learners in task work provides a better context for the activation of the learning process . . . and hence ultimately provides better opportunities for language learning to take place”. They further add, “Tasks are believed to foster processes of negotiation, modification, rephrasing, and experimentation that are at the heart of second language learning” (Ibid: 228). Tasks stipulate to the learners to pursue a few processes, and make use of some strategies and correct language on their way to complete them. Tasks seem extremely significant for the incorporation of the four language skills, as learners may have to speak, listen, read and write though their objective is to solve a problem, take part in a role play, solve a riddle, etc. Tasks are the finest tools to permit the learners do so and increase all language skills concurrently. Tasks can also create enthusiasm amongst learners to keenly engage in the procedure of task execution. At the same time, when performing the task, students assist each other and share experiences. Tasks stimulate learners, may be enjoyable and lead to a reduction of uneasiness among them. In other words, tasks are regarded to be valuable in teaching a foreign language, particularly for those learners who get little opportunity to apply the target language in real life. Additionally, tasks are capable of making learners self-assured in using the target language.

5.3 Components of Tasks

Tasks are made up of different components. According to Wright (1987); cited in Nunan (1989), tasks should have at least two main constituents:

1. Input data: (materials that students are offered like summary of an article, picture/ images, maps, etc).

2. Initiating question: (activities that trigger students to function with the input).
Candlin (1987) expands this figure to seven and recommends that tasks include input, roles, settings, actions, monitoring, outcomes and feedback (cited in Nunan, 1989). According to Candlin, input refers to the piece of information which is presented to learners to work upon it. Roles state the connection between members in a task. Settings refer to the surroundings that are required inside/outside classroom. Actions are the processes and subordinate-tasks to be done by the learners. Monitoring refers to the management of the task, outcomes refer to the aims of the task, and feedback is referred to the assessment of the task. The most approved upon and largely used components of tasks are those which are proposed by David Nunan (1989). He states that tasks consist of five elements: these are goals, input, and activities, roles of teachers and students, and settings. The simple model is shown diagrammatically:

Figure 5.1: Components of a ‘Task’

![Diagram of Task Components](image)

5.3.1 Goals: - Goals perform as a guideline on the whole procedure of task performance and give a connection between the task and the broader syllabus (Nunan, 1989, 2004). Goals must reflect learners’ necessities and attention so as to arouse their motivation for language use. Nunan (1989: 48) defines goals as “general intentions behind any given learning tasks”. At times goals can be assumed from an examination of tasks, if they are not clearly declared. This indicates that there is a goal in a task. There is possibly “one to one relationship between goals and tasks. In some cases a complex task involving a range of activities might be simultaneously moving learners towards several goals” (Ibid: 49).
5.3.2 Input: - Task input relates to the materials i.e. verbal or non-verbal and transcripts which are provided to students helping them out to carry out a task: such as textual, visual, dialogue or graphic. Input data can be made available by a teacher, a textbook or some new resource.

Verbal materials can be oral or printed language; and non-verbal materials may consist of pictures, photos, diagrams, charts, maps, etc. Input data of a task can be collected from a variety of sources in an authentic world situation such as letters, newspaper extracts, stories, family tree, weather forecasting, maps, drawings and shopping list (cited in Nunan, 1989, 2004).

Rather than the use of non-authentic (pedagogical) materials, the proponents of task-based instruction prefer use of real-world (authentic) materials more; though they think that both are useful. Additionally, Brosnan, et al. (1984); cited in Nunan (1989) have rationalized the use of real-world materials. They advocate making use of real world materials for the reason that they provide natural language, and a favourable situation for the learners to cope effectively with meaningful messages. Students are also provided with opportunities for using non-linguistic clues such as pictures, colours and the physical settings, and they are also allowed to see the relationship between the activity at hand and its relevance to the outside world. Even though they are pedagogical in nature, tasks should be at least similar to the authentic world to the degree that is possible.

5.3.3 Activities: - An activity is supposed to clearly state the process for carrying out the task- what the learners have to perform from the beginning till the end, whom to work with (separately, in pair, or in groups), what are the things that are expected of him/her throughout the task, and at what time they are expected to finish it. According to Williams and Burden (1997), activities classify what the learners really do with the input for the period of task execution (cited in Daniel, 2008).

5.3.4 Roles: - Role is the fourth essential element of a task. According to Nunan (1989: 79), role refers to “the part that learners and teachers are expected to play in carrying out learning tasks as well as the social and interpersonal relationships between the participants”. In brief, a task must identify clearly the roles of the teacher and learner.
5.3.5 Settings: - This is the final component of tasks which refers to the surroundings, where each task is performed. It is significant as far as the design of the task is concerned.

Nunan (1989: 91) describes settings as “the classroom arrangements specified or implied in the task, and it also requires consideration of whether the task is to be carried out wholly or partly outside the classroom”. In simple words, setting is a place where a task is accomplished either in classroom or outside. According to Nunan’s definition, specifies that task may or may not be done in the classroom. It shows that there are possibilities where the task is initiated in the classroom and finished out of the classroom.

5.4 Task Types

The Classifications of Tasks: Task types can be classified in many ways. Different writers categorize tasks in a different manner. Nunan (1989, 2004); and Richards and Rodgers (2001) classify tasks into two major types, namely:-

1. Real world tasks/target tasks: These tasks refer to the use of language in the world outside the classroom context.

2. Pedagogical tasks: These refer to the tasks which take place in the classroom.

Real world or target tasks are created to give the learners the ability that they need in order to operate them in the real world. These types of tasks replicate authentic task behaviour and main focus is often the success of an end product. They are the tasks which occur in daily life. They mirror the real-world uses of a language and can be regarded as a practice/ preparation for real world tasks. Real world tasks do not put particular focus on language results. They are the tasks which are devised to practice or rehearse those tasks that are discovered to be essential in a needs analysis and considered to be vital and useful in the real world. One of the examples of this kind of task is role play where students put themselves into the practice of a job interview, and making use of telephone. Another example of real-world task might be: “the learner will listen to a weather forecast and identify the predicted maximum temperature for the day. Or the learner will listen to a weather forecast and decide whether or not to take an umbrella and sweater to school” (cited in Nunan, 1989: 40).
On the other hand, pedagogical tasks are proposed to act as a connection between the classroom and the real-world because they are provided to train students for real life language usage. They are formulated to enhance the language acquisition process by taking into consideration a teachers' pedagogical goal, the learners' developmental age, skill level, and the social contexts for the second language learning environment. Pedagogical tasks facilitate the learners to comprehend how the language functions and also help in the expansion of learning abilities and strategies generally.

Pedagogical tasks are specifically made classroom tasks that need the use of specific communicative strategies and of specific types of language skills, grammar and vocabulary. For example, a task in which the two learners have to find out the number of differentiations between two similar pictures is an example of a pedagogical task. The task itself is not similar to any task one would generally find in the real world. They are basically classroom tasks. They are the tasks which include a psycholinguistic basis in SLA (Second language acquisition) theory and research but do not essentially mirror real-world tasks. An example of pedagogical task might be: “the learner will listen to an aural text and answer questions afterwards on whether given statements are true or false” (Nunan, 1989: 40). Pedagogical tasks are obtained from the real-world tasks sequenced to shape the task-based syllabus. It is the pedagogic tasks that teachers and students essentially operate within the classroom.

Nunan (1989: 5) refers to Long (1985) who says that a task can be defined as the “one hundred and one things people do in everyday life”. For example: washing clothes, making a doctor’s appointment and so forth. Nunan then remarks that if these one hundred and one things are carried out into the classroom setting they are transformed from being real-world tasks to pedagogical tasks.

Pedagogical tasks can further be subdivided into other groups. Willis (1996; cited in Richards and Rodgers, 2001) classifies six major types of tasks that could be acclimatized for use with nearly any topic. The cognitive process employed in the six types of tasks becomes increasing complex:

1. **Listing**: - This is the kind of task which consists of brainstorming and fact-finding. Listing tasks can facilitate the training of students' intellectual capacity and induction ability. Listing may appear to be unimaginative, however in
practice; listing tasks have a tendency to produce a lot of utterances because learners freely express their thoughts in this exercise.

2. **Ordering and Sorting:** These are the tasks which comprise sequencing, ranking, categorizing and classifying, and the result is a set of information ordered and sorted by a particular standard. These promote students’ comprehension, common sense and interpretation ability.

Ordering and sorting aid learners to assemble ideas into important groups, and formulate an organization of ideas according to a passage, and give some order to the reading process.

3. **Comparing:** This type of task includes matching, finding out similarities, or dissimilarities. The outcome can be correctly matched or collected items. This type of task develops students’ skill of differentiation.

4. **Problem-solving:** This type of task includes examining genuine situations, reasoning and intellectual power and decision-making. The outcome involves finding a way out of the problem, which can afterwards be assessed. These tasks encourage students’ reasoning and decision-making capabilities.

5. **Sharing Personal Experiences:** These are the tasks which encourage learners to speak freely about themselves and also have a discussion about their experiences with others. These types of tasks include narrating, telling, exploring and clarifying attitudes, views, and responses. The conclusion is generally common. These tasks can help students to share and exchange their facts, ideas, knowledge and experience.

6. **Creative tasks:** They can involve combinations of task types: listing, ordering and sorting, comparing, problem solving and many other activities. The outcome is a conclusive product that can be appreciated by a larger audience. Students develop their comprehensive problem-solving abilities with their reasoning and analyzing capabilities.

According to Pica, Kanagy and Falodun (1993); cited in Richards and Rodgers (2001), the sort of communication that takes place in task completion e.g., one-way or two-way information flow places tasks into five kinds: Jigsaw, information-gap, problem-solving, decision-making and opinion exchange.
1. **Jigsaw tasks:** - These tasks involve learners joining different pieces of information to form complete information (like three individuals or groups may have three different parts of a story and they are required to piece the story together).

2. **Information-gap tasks:** - If one student or group of students has one set of information and another student or group has a corresponding set of information. They are supposed to negotiate and figure out what the other student’s information is for completing an activity.

3. **Problem-solving tasks:** - In these kind of tasks, students are given a problem and some information. They have to come at a solution to the problem. There is usually a sole solution as the outcome.

4. **Decision-making tasks:** - Students are given a problem for which there are a number of possible results and through negotiation and discussion students have to choose one.

5. **Opinion exchange tasks:** - Students involve in discussion and exchange of ideas. They are not required to get to an agreement.

Having knowledge of these different task types is actually essential since it gives second language learning researchers an insight into the variety of tasks as well as how useful a task is in order to foster learning. The selection and execution of these tasks does play an important role in task-based language teaching.

### 5.5 Conclusion

The essential focus of this chapter was the task. Even though, a single definition for the term task has not been found, it was recognized that a task forms a communication activity where the primary emphasis is on meaning. The disparity between real world tasks and pedagogical tasks is at the core of the problem. The classroom environment cannot be fully equated to the real world setting. In a similar way, learning a language in a natural environment, especially in the beginning stages of life is very different from learning language as an academic subject.