Designing Holistic Units for Task-Based Learning

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**Bio Data:**
Roger Nunn has worked in EFL for over 30 years in seven different countries, including more than 22 years in Asia. He is currently working at the Petroleum Institute, a new University in Abu Dhabi, where he teaches communications and research skills. He has a Trinity College TEFL diploma, an MA and Ph.D. in TEFL from the University of Reading, UK. His Ph.D. study was on teaching methodology and curriculum development across cultural boundaries in a Middle East setting. He has published widely on a variety of topics and is particularly interested in international and intercultural perspectives on language teaching. He is also Senior Associate Editor of the Asian EFL Journal.

**Introduction**
This paper will outline the rationale behind the design of units of learning ‘activities’ in the form of interlocking sets of interactive holistic ‘tasks’ and supporting ‘exercises’. The illustrations used to support the argumentation are extracts from “task-based units” designed for a general education English foundation course at Kochi University in Japan over a seven-year period, and which are still being used and developed today. This paper will attempt to describe the theoretical underpinning of the units in relation to their practical aim: to encourage students to develop their ability to learn how to use English as a means of international communication.

Swan (2005) in his critique of task-based learning laments the polarization of attitudes in relation to recent discussion of language learning. On the one hand, traditionalists argue in favour of a linear, atomistic syllabus design. On the other hand, hard-line task-based ideologues seem to exclude any atomistic activity in favour of all-or-nothing holism. Bygate’s distinction (2003, p. 176) between tasks and exercises...
helps to situate this debate. He defines ‘exercises’ as “activities which practise parts of a skill, a new sub-skill, a new piece of knowledge”. In contrast, he defines ‘tasks’ as “activities which practise the whole integrated skill in some way”. Bygate’s discussion (2001, pp.23-48) lends support to the idea that task-based teaching needs to be situated in a broad curriculum framework, suggesting that isolated tasks are not sufficient in themselves to promote learning. The implication drawn from such research and discussion is that units of learning that involve the strategic use of holistic repeated “tasks” and supporting atomistic “exercises” provide one means of avoiding narrow ideological positions.

A task-based unitary framework is therefore proposed here that leads to student-led holistic outcomes in the form of written reports, spoken presentations and substantial small-group conversations that lead to decision-making outcomes. However, due consideration is also given to the design of atomistic exercises within the framework. In her model for task-based learning, Willis (1996, pp.52-65) proposes a pre-task component, a task-cycle component (pre-task/task/post-task) and a language focus component. With regard to focus on form, Willis emphasizes the importance of a post-task report phase, which could be a written activity such as writing a polished report or a spoken public-report phase in which students can be encouraged to focus on accuracy and can be prompted to recast inaccurate forms. Other key stages for Willis that improve the linguistic focus of task-based learning are the planning stage during which the teacher can take on a role of language advisor. This 1996 framework by Willis has been influential. In his 2006 Asian EFL Journal (AEJ) conference keynote speech, for example, Ellis made extensive reference to it, adopting it as his basic framework. This paper proposes a modified curriculum framework in the form of "Task-based Units".

Not surprisingly, SLA research does not lend strong support to either of the polarized positions discussed by Swan. Ellis (2005) outlined ten principles of SLA in instructed language learning. Rather than referring to work specifically focusing on TBL, this paper will consider the design of task-based units in relation to these ten
principles. For example, Ellis argues (pp. 19-20) that, “the opportunity to interact in
the L2 is central to developing L2 proficiency” (principle 8), and that this is “more
likely to be provided though ‘tasks’ than through exercises”. However, he also
suggests (p. 14) that, “instruction needs to ensure that learners also focus on form”
(principle 3). Ellis also highlights the need for extensive input (principle 6) and the
numerous contributions of output (principle 7). In the light of Ellis’s ten principles, it
appears that too much might be expected of “tasks”, and that a more holistic approach,
involving the design of task-based units, flexible combinations of repeated tasks and
supporting exercises, can better respond to Ellis’s ten principles. Designing task-
based units also allows us to respond more effectively to the holistic nature of
‘pragmatic’ and ‘discourse’ competence without neglecting the need to focus, if not
systematically, at least regularly, on atomistic aspects of “linguistic” competence and
communicative enabling skills.

Language Education and Holism

“Holism” is a simple concept - the ‘whole’ is always greater than the sum of its parts
- that has resonance when we consider what we do when we put together the parts to
use a language. It helps provide a rationale for dealing with the complexities of
interlocking skills and knowledge in language education. As Lowe (2005) points out,
the EFL profession does not need another dogma. It might, however, benefit from an
alternative conceptual framework from the fields of education and philosophy, which
helps to provide coherence in what can be a bewilderingly multidisciplinary
profession. Attempts to define the elusive concept of ‘competence’ for language
communication, learning and assessment always tend to generate inclusive models of
interlocking ‘competences’. (See Canale and Swain, 1980, Canale, 1983, Bachman,
1990.) Bachman (1990), for example, includes ‘strategic competence’, ‘language
competence’, subdivided into ‘organizational’, ‘grammatical’, ‘textual’ and
‘pragmatic’ competence, which is still further subdivided into ‘illocutionary’ and
‘sociolinguistic’ competence. To achieve ‘competence’, language learners need more
than just atomistic linguistic knowledge, however essential this may be. They also
need to practise putting together the parts.
Ellis (2005, p.19) provides support for activities requiring extensive output that “provide opportunities for learners to develop discourse skills”. Two very important disciplines for language learning, ‘discourse analysis’ and ‘pragmatics’, are holistic almost by definition. (See, for example, McCarthy, 1991, Schiffrin, 1994, Kasper, 1997, Mey, 2000.) Discourse analysts consider language above the sentence or single utterance level, analysing relationships between form and function, highlighting the way utterances combine to form coherent spoken or written texts and the way that whole texts relate to broader contexts in which the text is produced and used. Pragmatics focuses more on the ways language users cooperate to create and negotiate meaning in whole contexts. Neither discipline neglects the importance of linguistic form or of conventional meaning, but both disciplines remind us that language and language use always amount to something which is greater than the sum of the parts and that using language requires participants to make many appropriate linguistic choices, which are dependent on what is required in a broader context. As Oatey and Zegarac (in Schmitt, 2002, p. 74) put it, pragmatics investigates how people “communicate more than what the words or phrases of their utterances might mean by themselves”. Pragmatic and discourse competences are therefore holistic competences that take into account relationships between users, utterances in context, whole texts and the parts that constitute texts.

Halliday's systemic linguistic approach (See Halliday and Matthiesson, 2004, for a full systemic linguistic perspective) provides the most comprehensive holistic view of grammar in relation to the use of language. Halliday and Matthiesson (2004, p.19), explicitly state that systemic linguistics is: "concerned with language in its entirety; so that whatever is said about one aspect is to be understood always with reference to the total picture." (p.19). Assuming that discourse, pragmatic and systemic approaches to language use are reasonable representations of at least some of what is required to be a competent user of a language, it seems reasonable to consider 'holism' as an important concept for professionals involved in supporting language learning.
Educational Philosophy and Holism

Task-based learning may often appear to be underpinned by rational arguments based on selective use of cognitive SLA theory, but the 'holistic' nature of tasks could lead us to look outside the confines of EFL theory to broader educational theories which are humanistic in persuasion and allow us to view students and teachers as 'whole people' for whom language use is inseparable from their whole personal and cultural identity. The Holistic Education Network of Australia, which actively promotes ‘holism’ for education in general, provides a broader view of “holism” as an educational philosophy that is relevant to language education in its broad aim of promoting learning and understanding through dialogue. They concede that the concept, “is difficult to pin down precisely, because by its very nature it embraces paradox, mystery, and contradiction”. Block (2004) however demonstrates in his very readable online overview that a philosopher’s precision can dispel much of the conceptual vagueness. Mental holism refers to belief systems, the identity of a “belief content” being “determined by its relation to a body of theories, or even the whole of a person’s belief system.” (p.2) For Block, “claims about the world are confirmed not individually, but only in conjunction with theories of which they are a part”. From a semantic viewpoint, holism reflects the view that, “the meaning of a sentence is determined by its place in the web of sentences comprising a whole theory” (p.2).

The Holistic Education Network of Australia advocates holism as a broad, educational philosophy that engages the “whole person” in the learning process, implying that atomistic classroom approaches that only focus on exercise-like activities, only engage a part of a student’s learning capacity. The following points, adapted from their website, summarize the concept for education in general, and elucidate what is meant by the “whole person”:

1. Holism actively engages students in the teaching/learning process and encourages personal and collective responsibility.

2. Its aim is to nurture a “sense of wholeness” in healthy, whole, enquiring people who can learn whatever they need to know in any new context.

3. It encourages the transfer of learning across separate academic disciplines.
4. It explores the relationship between diversity and unity, not rejecting the group, but equally valuing diversity, variety and uniqueness.

5. It is ‘negotiated, not preordained’, ‘and created not found’.

While they are not concerned directly with language earning, the network emphasizes the principle of learning and understanding through dialogue, a principle that has a direct parallel in Ellis’s SLA theory. The Education Network states that, “holism asserts that everything exists in relationship, in a context of connection and meaning -- and that any change or event causes a realignment, however slight, throughout the entire pattern. ‘The whole is greater than the sum of its parts’ means that the whole is comprised of a pattern of relationships that are not contained by the parts but ultimately define them”. The website uses colourful charts, illustrating how ‘holism’ can be presented as a colourful educational concept, underlining at the same time the promotional tone of the site.

Holistic Education Network of Tasmania, Australia. Free to use for educational purposes but please acknowledge source. ([http://www.hent.org/maps_models.htm](http://www.hent.org/maps_models.htm))
**Holism and Language Learning**

While we must not fall into the trap of imagining that historical views of “progress” as reported in academic publications reflect practice regardless of context, language learning theory has seen a gradual move towards a more holistic view of language use. In their review of applied linguistics, Schmitt and Celce-Murcia (2002, p.12) for example argue that, “the last thirty years has seen a move towards viewing language in much more integrative and holistic terms”. Nunan (1989, 2005) considers skills integration as an important feature of language learning, appealing to such notions as interaction, task continuity, real world focus, language and learning focus and task outcomes. Skehan, too, (in Bygate et al., 2001, p.10) emphasizes whole task completion and outcomes, a relationship with real-world activities and giving priority to learners’ own meanings.

**“Can you learn a language in a holistic way?”**

In an IATEFL conference debate (Bygate et al., 2003, p.177), a speaker from the floor asked the following question:

> Traditional approaches are often condemned in the task-based literature for taking a ‘discrete item’ or ‘atomistic’ approach to the teaching of structure. The alternative, so-called holistic ‘focus on form’ during the communicative activity, sounds impressive. But how, actually, can you focus on structural points without looking at them one at a time?

This question is partly addressed by Bygate’s (2003) distinction between ‘exercises’ and ‘tasks’ discussed above. Similarly, Candlin (in Bygate et al., 2001, p. 235) defines ‘exercises’ as “serving as sequenceable preliminaries to, or supporters, of tasks”, whereas ‘tasks’ are more inclusive activities, engaging students in a variety of interlocking processes, and encouraging them to “practise the integrated use of language, acquire language development strategies and use language meaningfully and creatively.” This is a useful distinction, because it allows us to consider a combination of enabling ‘exercises’ and ‘tasks’ in larger, integrated units of learning, which might span several lessons. We may then continually change the focus between the ‘parts’ and the ‘whole’. The smaller ‘exercises’ are used in support of ‘tasks’ and the ‘tasks’ in support of reinforcing language learning. The ‘tasks’ have two purposes.
They provide a forum and a focus for intensive language practice and they assist in language learning. The latter is supported by providing comprehensible input, or obliging students to negotiate to make input comprehensible, but also by providing students and teachers with feedback on strengths and weaknesses when exposed to unscripted communication to plan for further practice. The effectiveness of tasks is enhanced by task repetition, (Bygate, 2001), allowing students to focus more on form-meaning relationships and develop fluency.

Ellis’s 10 Principles of Instructed Learning (2005)

Ellis’s principles of instructed learning have been used as a convenient summary of principles that help provide appropriate conditions for second language acquisition. These act as a kind of checklist for unit design that is independent of the rationale of the task-based approach.

1. Instruction needs to ensure that learners develop a rich repertoire of formulaic expressions and a rule-based competence. (Linguistic Competence)
2. Instruction needs to ensure that learners focus predominantly on meaning.
3. Instruction needs to ensure that learners also focus on form.
4. Instruction needs to be predominantly directed at developing implicit knowledge of the L2 but should not neglect explicit knowledge.
5. Instruction needs to take account of the learner’s built-in syllabusing.
6. Successful instructed language learning requires extensive L2 input.
7. Successful instructed language learning also requires opportunities for output.
8. The opportunity to interact in the L2 is central to developing L2 proficiency.
9. Instruction needs to take account of individual differences in learners.
10. When assessing learners’ L2 proficiency it is important to examine free as well as controlled production.

The design features of the units outlined below can be seen as an attempt to respond to many of these ten principles. In particular, the units provide extensive input, extensive opportunities for interaction and output and provide a framework for
assessing free production. They are predominantly directed at implicit knowledge, but do provide opportunities for focus on form and developing explicit knowledge. At later stages of the units, after extensive teacher input, students too assist in the design of materials for input, providing them with a full participatory role. They focus on meaning, in particular, pragmatic meaning, which Ellis highlights as an essential focus.

In her paper asking, ‘can pragmatic competence be taught’, Kasper (1997, p.9) emphasizes that, “the language classroom in its classical format does not offer students what they need – not in terms of teacher’s input, nor in terms of students’ productive language use”. She advocates student-centred activities, which not only extend students’ speaking time, but also provide practice in: conversational management, using a wider repertoire of communicative acts, and interacting with other participants to cooperate to achieve understanding. Pragmatic competence also involves understanding and responding spontaneously and appropriately to unpredictable utterances. The positive and negative results of strategic competence needs careful consideration during spontaneous communication, as an important aim of a language lesson is to acquire language, but avoidance strategies are expedient communication skills which might even hinder language learning. Holistic activities are not always group activities: making a full solo presentation is also an interactive activity involving the production of a whole stretch of meaningful language. This activity may even encourage (if not require) students to re-use pre-taught atomistic skills and language in a less controlled environment. Both students and teachers have to become familiar with a broad variety of discourse roles.

Lowe (2005, p.12) argues against dogma in relation to Task Based Learning, the hard version of which, according to Lowe, says, “on no account teach a language form without performing a task”. He suggests that context rather than dogma should determine whether the task comes first and the language work second or vice versa. There are arguments for doing ‘tasks’ and ‘exercises’ at different stages during a holistic learning unit. The ‘task’ often comes last in the classroom activities described
below, but this is not an absolute requirement. Some units use two or more tasks, and it is possible to use tasks at the start, in the middle or at the end of units. Doing a task first with no preparation can be an excellent diagnostic tool. Practice in the form of exercises can then be provided before doing the same or a similar task again. This approach is also useful for assessment and course evaluation purposes, rating scales being used by teachers and students to assess performance before and after teaching. The units of learning discussed below use a combination of exercises and tasks in integrated units of learning. It is only loosely based on Willis’s (1996) framework for a task-based cycle.

Richards (2005) summarizes the main concern about task-based learning, stating, “Learners’ grammar needs are determined on the basis of task performance rather than through a predetermined grammar syllabus. However, whether learners develop acceptable levels of grammatical proficiency through such an approach is problematic (p.153).” Richards points to research findings that challenge basic premises of TBL such as whether it always leads to negotiation of meaning (Foster, 1998 and Musumeci, 1996). Richards also discusses different ways of addressing grammar within task work (pp. 160-164) which include pre-teaching linguistic forms useful for the task, reducing the complexity of the task to allow students to focus more on form, and allowing students adequate planning time before performing a task, enabling them to coordinate both linguistic resources (such as vocabulary) and non-linguistic resources (such as problem solving strategies). He points out (p. 162) that the teacher has a key role in determining the extent to which the task is implemented with different emphases on fluency, accuracy and strategy use. Richards concludes (p. 164) that there is a need to consider “how a greater focus on grammatical form can be achieved during the process of designing and using tasks.” The design of task-based units, distinguishing between exercises and tasks and looking at ways to enhance the effectiveness of focus on form during tasks, is an attempt to respond to this need.

Willis (1996, p.54) favours a non-interventionist, monitoring role during the task performance itself. It is, however, unwise to make de-contextualized prescriptions
about any classroom approach. Teachers have to make their own decisions as their classroom interaction develops. Experience on our long-term project leads to the conclusion that, once task-based learning is well-established in a class, there can be a role for deliberate interruption, though not as a very regular occurrence, even when the task is running smoothly. Otherwise students become so absorbed in the task that they tend to neglect form, while it seems preferable that even during a task, language learners who need to acquire a language system should focus their attention equally on what they want to say and the best way to say it linguistically. For example, in a negotiation about what different drivers should have done to avoid an accident, a five-minute pause may be taken, to respond to inappropriate tense use, to generate “if” sentences or past modal expressions within the context of their discussion. Students generate as many utterances as possible such as “if the mini-driver had not parked on the corner, the escort driver would have seen the other car coming”, or "the mini driver should've waited longer at the intersection" and then go back to their negotiation.

Assessment
Micro-linguistic knowledge and micro-skills are characterized as the enabling skills and knowledge that support macro-activities, but performing in the macro-activities is the ultimate course goal. Tests are therefore always macro-activities such as giving a presentation or keeping a conversation going in a small group and are linked to the formative evaluation each student sets in motion in the placement testing prior to the course. Common rating scales for self, peer and teacher assessment has now been fully established to co-ordinate assessment and embody course aims. An example of one of four scales, the use of which has been developed over many years, is provided below. Eight areas of competence were defined for assessment of performance in tasks. These generated eight scales that were reduced to four scales, each of which combined two skills areas, as illustrated below. (See Nunn, 2000, for a full description.) Once such scales became established, they served as a basis for studies in intra-rater and inter-rater reliability to be reported elsewhere.
### Keeping a Conversation Going:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turn-taking and Negotiation Combined Scale</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Has (almost) no ability to keep a conversation going. Without constant help, the conversation is always likely to break down.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Rarely self selects, but responds minimally to other speakers and sometimes supports their Contributions. Negotiates rarely and/or only with a very limited repertoire. Communication sometimes breaks down without support.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Is able to take initiatives, self-selecting and negotiating whenever necessary drawing on a wide repertoire of expressions and techniques. Helps other participants to join in and interrupts politely when appropriate.</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Turn-taking

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turn-taking</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Has (almost) no ability to exploit turn-taking to keep a conversation going. Without constant help, the conversation is always likely to break down.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Rarely self selects, but responds minimally to other speakers and sometimes supports their contributions. Only rarely nominates other speakers, even when he/she has the floor. Communication sometimes breaks down without support.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Responds fully when nominated, supports other speakers and sometimes self selects. Communication almost never breaks down.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Is able to take initiatives, self-selecting, holding the floor, interrupting or nominating as the conversation demands. Helps other participants to join in.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Making Communication Effective: Negotiation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negotiation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Has (almost) no ability to negotiate effectively. Without constant help, communication of even basic information is unlikely to be successful.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Sometimes adjusts to the contributions of other speakers, but only rarely negotiates and then only with a very limited repertoire limiting the effectiveness of the communication.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Is able to negotiate when necessary, adjusting to the contributions of other speakers and demonstrating an adequate repertoire for negotiation. Communication is normally effective and successful.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Is able to adjust fully to other speakers’ contributions, taking initiatives and negotiating persistently whenever necessary, drawing on a wide repertoire of expressions and techniques. Takes a full share of the responsibility for successful communication.</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
An Overview of a Task-based Project Unit: Preparing to Visit Foreign Countries

The unit outlined below represented the first stage in a long-term curriculum process to design task-based units. A pool of task-based units was then prepared by a team of three full and twelve part-time course tutors. These units are constantly being revised and developed. They are made available to all other instructors for use in the courses. In this way, new teachers are provided with a resource bank of units. Experienced teachers tend to adapt the materials to fit their own teaching styles and the identified needs of particular classes. Table 1 below outlines the first unit of recorded and photocopiable materials prepared by full-time staff for course tutors to modify and re-design to meet the precise needs of their teaching groups. Several course tutors also used it as a kind of model for developing parallel units. Teaching method and classroom activities all had the ultimate aim of preparing students to take part in macro-activities that can be classified into two basic kinds, the second of which is illustrated below:

1. Solo-speaking:
   - Giving a short speech or presentation.
   - Narratives.
   - Telling or retelling a story.
   - Telling a well-known story, a personal or funny story.

2. Small-group conversations (including pairs and small groups of three and four):
   - Decision making conversations
   - Information exchange conversations
   - Opinion exchange conversations
   - Negotiations
   - Surveys

Preparation Stage

Extensive and intensive listening and reading activities provide extensive input in both listening and reading in the topic area. The listening components also model the interactive tasks that the units highlight.
Unit Overview (Part 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity type</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preparatory</td>
<td>Providing input</td>
<td>A set of reading texts on foreign trips, e.g., Darren’s trip to Fiji</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>activities</td>
<td>Introducing topic area and lexis</td>
<td>A recorded two-person conversation choosing a foreign country for a holiday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening/</td>
<td>Extensive reading and listening</td>
<td>A three-person conversation choosing a country for a homestay or study visit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading Activities</td>
<td>Modelling future activities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Example from part 1

A reading text (also available as a spoken narrative for listening): A trip to Fiji

Read about Darren’s trip to Fiji and fill in the gaps using the words in the table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main curries</th>
<th>east Indian months</th>
<th>lessons</th>
<th>hitchhiking</th>
<th>family</th>
<th>western seasick</th>
<th>crew</th>
<th>afford</th>
<th>youth</th>
<th>giant</th>
<th>lay</th>
<th>rainwater</th>
<th>humid</th>
<th>cheap</th>
<th>capital</th>
<th>coral</th>
<th>Fiji</th>
<th>traditional</th>
<th>Pacific</th>
<th>Fijian spending</th>
<th>sun-bathing</th>
<th>thirty-four</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

After I graduated from university, I wanted to go somewhere very different from Canada so I decided to go to ________, a small island country in the __________ Ocean. Fiji is a very interesting place because it has two cultures - the native ________ people and people of ________ descent. In addition to the local food, you can also find many Indian restaurants with tandoori chicken and lots of ________. Everyone knows Fiji has very warm weather but I want to explain it in more detail. On the __________, the weather is very different. On the west side, it's hot and very dry but on the _____ side the weather is wet and ________. Fiji's ________ city, Suva, is on the east side. Nadi, which has the international airport, is in ________ Fiji.

I didn't have very much money when I went to Fiji so I couldn't _____ hotels. Usually I stayed in a ________ hostel which costs about 1000 yen per night with breakfast. This is very ________ but you have to share a ________-style room with six to ten beds. In the countryside, you can stay in the ________ huts called bures. These are very cheap but they have no ________. I also used my tent a lot when camping on the beaches. The most interesting part of my trip was ________ time on a small island by myself. I was taken to the island by motorboat, and picked up two weeks later. The island had a small kitchen area for cooking, ________ for taking a shower and a small bure to sleep in. There was nothing else. I spent every day snorkeling, reading, and ________. The ________ was beautiful with many tropical fish.

After spending three ________ in Fiji, I was ready to try something different. A popular way to travel in the South Pacific is ________. But not by car. I didn't have enough money to buy an airplane ticket so I went to the yacht club and I found...
that you can get a job as a _____ member on sailboats going to Australia or New Zealand. I was very lucky to join a ______ going to Australia. The trip from Fiji to Australia took ______ days, including a one-week stop in a small country called Vanuato. I was ______ for the first week but after that I got used to it and it was a very good experience for me. I had two jobs on the yacht. In the mornings from 8-12 I taught the three children their school______. Also, I had to do a night watch from 8 p.m. until midnight. The most exciting part of the trip was stopping at a small island near New Caledonia to watch the ______ sea turtles come up on the beach to ______ their eggs.

What do you think? Answer these questions in writing and explain your answers.
Which part of Darren’s trip would you have enjoyed the most?
Which part would you not have enjoyed?
Now make a group of three students and compare your answers. Be ready to report your discussion to the whole class.

Part 2: Micro-linguistic Exercises
There are arguments for doing micro-linguistic activities at different stages of the unit. As the aim is to encourage focus on form, it is intended that this would encourage students to continue focusing partly on the form of their message during the holistic interactive tasks. A pool of exercises is available: instructors decide if and when to apply them, before, between or after tasks, depending on the perceived needs of students at different stages of the unit.

Unit Overview (Part 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language exercises at various stages of the unit</th>
<th>Warm-up activities, Focus on form, Practising language useful for tasks Intensive reading and listening practice</th>
<th>Anagrams – names of countries and nationality words A set of exercises for question practice (atomistic written exercises, and exercises combined with listening/reading texts), (direct, indirect, conversational questions, follow-up questions, asking for clarification) Comparisons Decision-making expressions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Examples from Part 2.

Enabling Skill 1: How to stay in English when you don’t understand.

The post office employee can’t always understand what the customer wants. Use the following expressions in the box to help him keep the conversation going in English:

- I’m sorry. Could you repeat that more slowly please?
- Could you spell that, please?
- Would you mind repeating the name of the country again, please?
- Excuse me, I didn’t quite catch that.
- I still haven’t quite got that.
- I’m sorry. I don’t understand X. Customer: I’d like a stamp for Afghanistan, please.

Assistant: Excuse me, …………………………………

Customer: I’d like a stamp for this airmail letter to Afghanistan.

Assistant: I still haven’t quite got that. Would ………………… the name of the country again, please?

Customer: Afghanistan.

Assistant: Afghanistan, sure. That’s 110 yen.

Customer: And I’ve got another airmail letter for Qatar.

Assistant: I’m sorry. Could you …………………………. please?

Customer: Yes, sure. I need another stamp for Qatar.

Assistant: Could ……………………….., please?


Assistant: Q-U-A


Customer: My father is a philatelist. Do you have any special stamps?

Assistant: I’m sorry. …………………………… philatelist.

Customer: My father collects stamps.

Assistant: Oh! I understand. Yes, we have some very nice collection stamps this week.
Practise reading the conversation with your partner.
If you are the customer, change the underlined information.
If you are the assistant, check when you don’t understand.

Skill 2: Practise asking questions to find out information.
Daisuke is preparing some questions for his conversation. The words are in the wrong order. Write them again correctly.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>in exactly England we where would go?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation</td>
<td>kind accommodation Scarborough is what of there in?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>what us of activities there could kind you we do ?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weather</td>
<td>weather is during what the like the in summer England?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of stay</td>
<td>how we would long there stay?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price</td>
<td>Cost how would it much?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>price in what is the included?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other information</td>
<td>know is need else there anything we to?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Part 3: Interactive Tasks
The interactive tasks illustrated below are central to the design of the units. They are used by teachers to design and record listening materials. They are used by students to practice using language in an interactive activity, to put into practice what they have learned and to develop their ability to communicate in a semi-authentic situation.
Unit Overview Part 3: Interactive Task 1:

| Initial Tasks | Teacher-Generated | Provider output activities, providing opportunities for extensive interaction, promoting pragmatic functional ability, providing opportunities to practise lexico-grammar | A small-group conversation exchanging information on three countries from an information sheet provided by the teacher comparing the information reaching a decision |

Example of Part 3: Choosing a Foreign Country

Each group member has information about a different English-speaking location. The students (1) exchange information, (2) exchange opinions about the three or four locations, (3) try to make a decision about one country they will visit together.

You are planning to spend about one month in an English speaking country. Each student in your group has information about a different country.

1. Read this sheet carefully. Prepare to speak. Remember these are only notes. Try to speak clearly and correctly. You may add information from your knowledge or imagination.
2. You will need to ask questions to find out information about the other countries.
3. You will need to stay in English when you can’t understand.
4. You will need to remember the information to decide which country your group will visit.

Student A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>England</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Scarborough - Small seaside town North East England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation</td>
<td>With an English family (the father is a fisherman)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weather</td>
<td>15-25°C in summer - often changes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Activities       | Fishing  
|                 | Windsurfing  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sailing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Length of stay</td>
<td>3 weeks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Price           | 60,000 yen  
|                 | (Includes accommodation, food and activities)  |

Example:

- *Where exactly would we go in England?*

  *Scarborough* - Small seaside town North East England

  *(Have you heard of) Scarborough. (It’s) a small, but very attractive seaside town in the North East of England.*

### Student B

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>U.S.A.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>New York</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation</td>
<td>Dormitory for international students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Weather   | Very cold in winter  
|           | Hot and humid in summer |
| Activities | Many sports  
|           | Night clubs |
| Length of stay | 5 weeks  |
| Price     | 150,000 yen  
|           | Includes accommodation, breakfast and evening meal, indoor sports at the hostel |

Example.

*Where exactly would we go in America?*

  *New York*

  - *(We could try) New York. (It’s) a really interesting and lively city.*
Unit Overview Part 3

| Final Tasks                          | Task repetition Internet research skills Extensive reading Student generated input and information Assessment/evaluation of students and unit Final self-assessment Reaching a decision in a team Reporting a decision individually | Students fill in similar sheets to task 1, researching information from countries where English is not a first language Assessment in a three-person conversation using student-prepared information with unknown interlocutors group report – spoken individual report – written (letter) |

Example of Part 3: Interactive Task 2

The final task is student centred, in that the students research information using the same categories as for task one, about a potential destination, in which English is spoken as a foreign language. Students are encouraged to research beyond contexts where English is a native language. The task format itself is very similar to task one, except the information is different, and is supplied by the students. This provides the kind of task repetition discussed above that has been found to be beneficial by Bygate (2001).

Choosing a Foreign Country: Preparation Sheet

Prepare detailed information for your next conversation. You are planning to spend about one month in a foreign country where English is spoken as a second or foreign language. Each student in your group has information about a different country. Use books or the Internet to find out interesting information to fill out the table below. Make notes using key word and phrases, do not write full sentences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

88
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accommodation</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weather</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of stay</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other important information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interesting cultural information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Optional final written assignment**

Write a letter in English to your parents asking for help to visit the foreign country your group has chosen. Start like this:

My dear parents,

I am writing to you in English to show you that I am working very hard to improve my English ability.

- *Explain why you need to visit a country where English is a foreign language and how this will improve your English in our international world.*
- *Explain which countries you thought about in your group.*
- *Explain why you chose the country you did.*
- *Explain the expenses.*
- *Explain about things like safety, accommodation, etc.*
- *Ask for help and permission.*

**Conclusions**

“Task-based units”, rather than “task-based learning” per se, have been presented here as a flexible curriculum tool that supports the teacher by providing a large pool of possible materials, but which does not impose a linear syllabus for teachers to
follow inflexibly. Decisions about the balance between focus on task and focus on
form are ultimately left to the teacher. How much of a unit will be used in a particular
class is also left to the judgement of the teacher. Even the order of materials is not
fixed. Worksheets use simple word processing tools and can also be modified by
individual teachers according to their needs. Teachers are also encouraged to design
alternative units that match their own teaching style. To ensure fairness in assessment
between different classes, the rating scales are used by all classes as common criteria
for all task assessments.

A set of task-based units provides the kind of practice that fulfils many of Ellis's ten
principles for SLA, such as extensive input, focus on meaning, focus on form,
opportunities to interact and extensive opportunities for output. It does not assume
that students should not be thinking of the form of the message, just because they are
required to focus on the message itself. An underlying assumption is that ways need
to be found to encourage students to reflect on the form of the message during the
interactive task phases. The teacher may decide to adopt different roles, during the
tasks. In addition to independent, student–led group work, teacher-led performances
by small groups in front of the class can be used to focus on form. During such
sessions the teacher may interrupt or even take a role in the conversation.

In the context where they were designed, after initial innovation difficulties of an
administrative nature, the units have become a standard accepted format, well-
supported by students, who testify to improved ability by the end of the course.
Indeed, some students state that these units provided them with their first
opportunities to really use English effectively. However, student feedback is not
taken as irrefutable evidence of progress. Students and teachers use the assessment
criteria for self, peer and course evaluation. Students are graded in task performance
at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the course using these common
rating criteria. Teachers are not judged on their students final grades and are
encouraged to use assessment to help them find their own ways of improving
students' language ability during task performances. This approach has also led to
professional development opportunities for teachers, some of whom are gaining their first experience in the profession, in areas such as, designing and developing materials, learning to evaluate spoken performances using rating scales and making mini-presentations at local academic meetings and participants are encouraged to conduct data-supported research into different aspects of the project such as assessment or classroom discourse studies.

References


http://www.nyu.edu/gsas/dept/philo/faculty/block/papers/MentalSemanticHolism.html


