Task Criteria and Activity Differentiation in EFL Coursebooks

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Abstract

A deeper understanding of tasks and how they differ from activities facilitates adaptation of General English (GE) coursebook materials for EFL learners. This paper argues that certain "tasks" in coursebooks that advertise task-based lessons do not always meet the explanations of researchers on the matter. By way of synthesis, Ellis (2003) considers nine researchers' definitions of language tasks in order to formulate six criteria of tasks, and this is utilized in conjunction with Littlejohn's (1998) framework for coursebook analysis. This analysis finds that listening "tasks" in *Interchange* (2005a), an EFL coursebook that advertises Task-Based Learning (TBL) listening, fall short of Ellis's criteria. This paper further proposes methods of altering activities towards the concept of tasks to guide instructors in the adaptation of EFL materials.

Introduction

Task-Based Learning (TBL) has been promoted over the years and is widely written about and researched. Yet, despite the abundant literature on tasks, Chapelle (2008) highlights a shortage of research into materials development, especially with regard to coursebook analysis of tasks. In the EFL market, certain publishers advertize coursebooks as being TBL; however, language instructors may notice that there are discrepancies between their task features and outcomes. That is, teachers may wonder to what degree tasks in self-advertized TBL coursebooks match the collective definition of tasks by researchers on the matter.

One example of a definition of tasks is by Bygate, Skehan, and Swain (2001) who describe a task as an "activity which requires learners to use language, with an emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective" (p. 11). The terms *tasks* and *activities* are commonly used interchangeably in reference to coursebook materials, however there are differences, supported by the research. For example, Nunan (1999) stresses that an important contrast between the two terms is that tasks have a focus on meaning while activities have a stronger target of linguistic outcomes. An understanding of the differences between tasks and activities emerges as a key guiding tool for teachers who want to incorporate TBL into their courses.

Tomlinson (2003) sheds light on the distinction between coursebook *analysis* (i. e., a focus on materials) and *evaluation* (e. g., how the coursebook is perceived to match a particular set of students' needs and learning styles). With analysis of tasks as a focal point, this paper examines listening tasks presented in the EFL coursebook *Interchange* (2005a) via Littlejohn's (1998) three levels of analysis. Selecting three units from the midpoint of the coursebook, I examine the degree to which the listening tasks in these units correspond to Ellis's six criteria of tasks. These six criteria have been formulated upon investigation of various researchers' definitions of tasks (see Appendix). The purpose of this paper is to reveal limitations in course

material and offer suggestions for their enhancement.

Task Criteria and Activity Differentiation

In general, tasks are seen as planned language exercises with greater depth than activities, a distinction essential in the planning phase of lessons for language development. Skehan (1996) points to a potential pitfall of not carefully planning language-learning tasks, as it can eventuate in "pressure for immediate communication rather than interlanguage change and growth" (p. 58). In other words, there is more to a task than the completion of drills or having learners merely speak the target language. In a similar manner, Ellis (1997) asks what constitutes a successful language task and cautions that some instructors may feel that an activity was successful if "they have evidence that the learners found it enjoyable and useful" despite the fact that the students may have actually learned very little from it (p. 220). To preclude the occurrence of such issues, a deeper understanding of tasks and activities is critical.

Ellis (2003) identifies six major criteria, presented in table 1: Scope, perspective form, authenticity, linguistic skills, psychological process, and outcome. Scope refers to a teacher's working plan of the task. This working plan stresses pragmatic usage of language over semantic drills. The second criterion, perspective form, focuses on meaning for learners in tasks. This is in opposition to a concentration on what the teacher may consider meaningful from his or her perspective, which is typical in activities. Stated differently, instructors may ask themselves if the materials are for teaching or language acquisition. Authenticity of tasks, the third criterion, emphasizes a connection of the task with students' lives outside of the EFL classroom. Would students actually perform a similar action in the real world? The fourth criterion of linguistic skills concerns a focus on language form, or a specific TL linguistic feature for learners to practice or be aware of. The fifth criterion is psychological process or cognitive demands placed on learners. Finally, outcomes, the sixth criterion, concern a specific product that students have produced via application of the TL, which an instructor can assess. In particular, the outcomes in tasks are communicative. In addition to features for each of Ellis' criteria, table 1 displays questions for the reader to be mindful of when considering each feature.

Greater understanding of coursebook exercises allows teachers to differentiate between tasks and activities and what students are being asked to perform. It follows that coursebook exercises devoid of any of these six features are not tasks in the sense of TBL. Rather, they are more analogous to the concept of activities. Activities include language exercises, either mechanical (i. e., a grammar specific drill in which meaning and context is unnecessary), meaningful (i. e., the listener does not know the speaker's answer), or communicative (i. e., context is required for understanding) (Paulston, 1972) that do not satisfy Ellis's six criteria of tasks. Task analysis and activity differentiation is an integral distinction for teachers to consider, for Ellis's criteria make possible multi-layered analysis of what is occurring below the surface of tasks and activities in EFL coursebooks. Simply put, potential issues can be identified and accounted for, considering in-depth understanding of tasks, enables instructors to clearly perceive, comprehend, and predict what learners are being asked to perform.

Considering Ellis's criterion of scope, a lack thereof results in activities that are either too short, too broad, or necessitate clear goals. Lee (2000) describes tasks as "a language learning endeavor that requires learners to comprehend, manipulate, and/or produce the target language as they perform some set of work-plans" (p. 32). Put another way, there is a structured plan, or blueprint, in place for tasks. For example, Skehan (1996) proposes a framework for tasks involving set up and execution. This is then followed up by one or two more opportunities for content and target language application. Conversely, activities may not be developed over such steps. Along another line of thinking, Coughlan and Duff (1994) take a socio-affective viewpoint in differentiating tasks from activities. They consider the teacher as having a greater

TABLE 1. CRITERIA OF TASKS COMPILED FROM NINE RESEARCHERS' DEFFINITIONS OF TASKS

Criteria	Feature	Question to consider
Scope	A work plan	Is it pragmatic focused rather than semantic (Lee, 2000; Nunan, 1989)? Is there a structured plan? (Breen, 1989; Lee, 2000)?
Perspective form	Primary focus on meaning	Is the task "seen from task designer's or the participant's point of view." Is there a focus on meaning or display of language knowledge (Skehan, 1996; Bygate, Skehan, and Swain, 2001)?
Authenticity	Real world process of language activity	Is there a real-world activity related? Would the learner perform a similar task outside the classroom (Long, 1985)?
Linguistic skills	Any of the four language skills	Which language skill is fostered? Language production is not a requirement (Richard, Platt, & Webber, 1985).
Psychological process	Cognitive process	Do learners interact with and engage materials? Is there a thought process for learners, which takes place (Prabhu, 1987)?
Outcome	Clearly defined communicative outcome	Rather than merely use of language, is there a clear assessable form of communicative content (Richards, Platt, and Weber, 1985; Crookes, 1986)?

Adapted from Ellis (2003)

role in the "shaping" of a task (p. 185), which likewise relates to the criteria of a work plan as identified by Ellis (2003) and Lee (2000). On the other hand, an activity may not have such clearly defined scope. Examples of activities with limited scope include those requiring learners to perform various mechanical drills, which are not clearly related to the theme of a unit in regard to meaning. To illustrate the point, there can be a number of activities and weakly connected content, which do not sequence meaningfully or clearly scaffold towards an end goal. An organized plan is necessary for tasks because it makes clear to learners where their efforts will lead, which fosters motives, meaning, and understanding.

With reference to the second criterion stipulated by Ellis (2003), perspective form, deficiency in meaning results in learners who are less able to notice how class content connects to the outside world. Consequently, absence of relevance can lead to a decline in motivation to fully participate during a lesson. Related to this notion is Tomlinson's (2008) survey of sixty teachers, who consider that many General English (GE) textbooks, "text and activities are not preparing students for real life situations" (p. 20). For instance, numerous simulations and activities in GE coursebooks demand learners to imagine a rather unlikely scenario. Tomlinson (2008) also finds that "texts and activities do not engage the interest of foreign students" (p. 20), indicating a further lack of meaning for learners. For example, it can be difficult for EFL learners to conceptualize situations abroad if they have never left their home country. Therefore, the analysis of tasks in regard to perspective form becomes essential.

Ellis's third criterion raises an emphasis on authentic use of language, which is related to perspective form. Situations that learners may actually encounter are vital in tasks. In support of this, Nunan (2004) stresses procedural authenticity in tasks. This refers to "procedures that attempt to replicate and rehearse in the classroom the kinds of things that learners need to do outside of the classroom" (p. 54). For example, Long (1985) explains that examples of tasks include:

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, taking a hotel reservation, writing a cheque, 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. 'Tasks' are the things people will tell you they do if you ask them and they are not applied linguists.
(Long 1985, p. 89)

From this understanding, it is evident that language exercises consisting of mechanical TL drills (Paulston, 1972) are not tasks, for the reason that they are unlikely scenarios in students' lives outside the EFL classroom. Activities, as a result, may not offer authentic situations to learners.

Without a concentration on target linguistic skills, Ellis's fourth criterion, learners may be practicing language without improving their language ability in a focused way. For example, having learners discuss a topic, with no requirement of using a particular new phrase or expression, would not be considered a task. In support of this notion, Richards, Platt, and Weber (1985) explain that tasks give "a purpose for classroom activity which goes beyond practice of language for its own sake" (p. 289). A lack of a focus on form in EFL courses can result in fewer gains in TL accuracy, or incomplete knowledge of the L2, a criticism of Communicative Language Teaching (Lightbown and Spada, 1998). For this reason, it is essential that tasks incorporate specific TL skills, phrases, or vocabulary.

The fifth criterion of psychological process is an additional means of distinguishing a task from an activity. For example, having learners repeat words or phrases after the instructor would not be interpreted as higher-level thinking. Interaction, engagement, and process of thought, as seen in table 1, are necessary components (Prabhu, 1987). For instance, skills that place cognitive demands on learners include inferencing, identifying key points, and negotiating. Tomlinson, Dat, Masuhara, and Rudby (2001), describe how activities with too low a cognitive demand possibly insult adult learners. Examples of such activities include the discussion of rudimentary topics, questions that are unrelated to the lives of learners, or the overuse of display questions. Psychological process is a critical attribute in the characterization of a language-learning task.

Last but not least, the criterion in table 1 of outcomes is another differentiation of tasks from activities. Nunan (1989) speaks of a task as having a "sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right" (p. 10). Unfortunately, it is often the case that EFL learners are performing activities without a clear understanding of why they are being asked to do certain actions. In certain activities, it can be the case that instructors do not develop students' motives for activity completion fully enough. As a result, students may not clearly perceive where the activity will lead. Skehan (1996) advocates assessable forms of communicative outcomes to deal with such issues. Clear outcomes provide learners with a sense of closure that comes with the accomplishment of a task, which an instructor can comprehensively assess.

For the purpose of enhancing the effectiveness of lessons, teachers may question as to what degree tasks in EFL coursebooks match Ellis's aforementioned criteria. Littlejohn (1998) emphasizes that analyzing tasks is a viable means of seeing "inside them" and allows teachers to "take more control over their design and use" (p. 205). Thus, greater understanding of tasks is crucial for teachers to make coursebook adjustments to better meet the needs and learning styles of their students. For instance, a language activity such as a drill might have certain features of tasks such as linguistic skills, outcomes, and perspective form, yet lack other features such as psychological process, authenticity, and scope.

Methodology/Procedure

Littlejohn (1998) maintains that his three levels of analysis "provide a thorough basis for testing out how far both aims and claims in materials are met, and thus will aid anyone in their design and use to take more control of the materials with which they are involved" (p. 202). Following Littlejohn's (1998) study of EFL materials, content analysis of listening tasks from the coursebook *Interchange* (2005a) utilizes a checklist method. McGrath (2002) outlines benefits of the checklist method such as its being a systematic, cost effective, easily recordable, and explicit means of analysis of EFL materials. I examine how certain aspects of tasks from *Interchange* (2005a) correspond to Ellis's six criteria. For any shortcomings, the essay pinpoints areas needing adaptation by teachers, and suggests some possibilities for doing so.

The description of listening sections from the *Teacher's Manual* (2005b) of the textbook *Interchange* (2005a), explains that:

> The listening syllabus emphasizes task-based listening activities and incorporates both top-down processing skills and bottom-up processing skills. The listening exercises for all levels provide focus questions or tasks that give students a purpose for listening, while graphic organizers such as charts provide note-taking support. (p. ix)

To look at all task types in the coursebook is beyond the scope of this paper. However, in view of Interchange (2005a) advertising task-based listening, this becomes a fitting topic for examination. Notably, Littlejohn (1998) lists three questions to bear in mind during the analysis of coursebooks:

1. What aspects of materials should we examine?
2. How can we examine the materials?
3. How can we relate the findings to our own teaching contexts? (Littlejohn, 1998, p. 192)

These three questions become a focal point for each of the previously mentioned three levels of analysis. With reference to the first question (level-one analysis), the target audience of the coursebook is EFL learners at the beginner level. For analysis, Littlejohn (1998) advocates for the investigation of roughly 10%−15% of a coursebook, and recommends choosing units from the halfway point of the coursebook. *Interchange* (2005a), is a sixteen-unit coursebook, therefore, I have selected units eight, nine, and ten for examination. Concerning the second question (level-two analysis), Ellis's six criteria replace Littlejohn's (1998) variables, exploring further what is required of students in a subjective manner. The third-level of analysis provides suggestions on how teachers can address any lack of Ellis's criteria in EFL coursebook language exercises. Littlejohn (1998) asserts that in this third level, the roles of both the teacher and learner during the task or activity becomes clear, thereby supporting instructors to more easily predict how their own particular students are likely to react to the material.

Data/Discussion

Level-one analysis objectively describes the coursebook *Interchange* (2005a), which has the aim of developing GE ability for low-level English language learners. It is an integrated-skills GE coursebook, focusing primarily on the four skills in addition to pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. In part, the sequence of the listening tasks is dictated by the repetition of key vocabulary and grammar, which are recycled from an earlier stage for each unit. It is clear to see that the topics of the listening "task" selections

match the respective themes and use of vocabulary in each unit. *Interchange* (2005a) bases units on situations that learners may encounter during conversations with others in an English speaking country. Some of these unit topics include discussion of neighborhoods (unit 8), describing people (unit 9), and past experiences (unit 9). With this overall picture of the units, I now investigate listening tasks from units eight, nine, and ten, and see how they correspond to Ellis's criteria (see table 2).

Level-two analysis, presented in figure 1, is a subjective view of what learners are asked to accomplish. Analysis reveals that the "tasks" eight, nine and ten meet Ellis's criteria of scope (criterion one) and perspective (criterion two). However, they lack Ellis's third criterion of authenticity. Although situations

TABLE 2: LEVEL-TWO ANALYSIS, LISTENING TASK ANALYSIS SHEET

		Unit 8	Unit 9	Unit 10
	Listening task:	1	2	3
1	Scope:			
	pragmatic focused	[X]	[X]	[X]
2	Perspective form:			
	primary focus on meaning	[X]	[X]	[X]
3	Authenticity:			
	real-world process of language activity	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
	likely real-world scenario	[X]	[ ]	[X]
4	Listening strategies:			
	listening for specific details	[X]	[X]	[X]
	listening for the main idea	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
	listening for inference	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
	listening for personal elaboration	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
5	Psychological process:			
	A. higher order cognitive process			
	hypothesize	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
	formulation of items into complete sentences	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
	differentiate important from less important information	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
	negotiate, discuss information, decide with others	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
	express own ideas, opinions, problem solving	[X]	[ ]	[ ]
	B. Lower level cognitive process	[X]	[X]	[X]
	retrieve from STM/Working memory			
6	Outcome:			
	clearly defined communicative outcome	[X]	[ ]	[ ]
	assessable form of content	[X]	[X]	[X]

Level-two analysis, listening task analysis sheet, adapted from Littlejohn (1998)

similar to the listening selections may occur, all three situations place the listener in an outside observer's position overhearing a dialogue. In other words, the listening selection is not directed towards the listener. As a result, these listening selections do not meet Ellis's definition of real-world process of language for authenticity. Furthermore, unit nine's scenario is not a likely situation for most learners. Regarding Littlejohn's level-three analysis, or pedagogical implications, I suggest supplementing the task with scaffolding material to build students' background knowledge, and in turn, create meaning for learners (Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983). A brief and related newspaper article, or photographs of the TL culture directly relating to the listening selection, for example, would build understanding and relevance for learners. The aforementioned suggestions are just some of the many way authenticity of materials can be developed for tasks. In addition to authenticity, analysis of the *Interchange* (2005a) "tasks" pertaining to the criterion of linguistic skills (Ellis's criterion four) brings to light an area requiring improvement. Figure 1 shows that the "tasks" in units eight, nine, and ten practice the strategy of listening for specific details. On the other hand, there are various other listening skills that instructors can expose learners to that are not covered by the task. Thus, a proposal for adaptation (Littlejohn's level-three analysis) is for teachers to complement the coursebook tasks with other listening strategy practice such as cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective listening skills. Cognitive listening skills include the practice of text reconstruction and expansion in writing on what students have listened to (Vandergrift, 1997). Metacognitive strategies involve teaching students to evaluate and monitor their own listening (Vandergrift, 1997). Finally, socio-affective listening strategies incorporate help-seeking opportunities from classmates (Vandergrift, 1997). Making students cognizant of and comfortable with the various listening skills is fundamental in English for Academic Purpose (EAP) courses, and tasks can be altered to achieve this.

Level-two analysis of the "tasks" also shows that higher-level cognitive process, Ellis's fifth criterion of tasks, is not required of learners from the listening exercises in units nine and ten. For example, figure 1 presents no inference, critical thinking, or other higher-level psychological process that the "tasks" place on learners. In unit eight, there is an opportunity for students to voice their opinion to a partner following the listening selection. Yet this is not what most would concede as critical thinking. Accordingly, for Littlejohn's analysis, I propose that teachers modify demands placed on learners for listening tasks in units nine and ten. To clarify this point, teachers can supplement listening tasks with summarization or text reconstruction elements. Judgment or value ranking and other problem-solving aspects are other possible adaptations. A final modification might be providing opportunities for reflection, which is a widely recognized phase of the learning process. These are but a few examples of how higher-level cognitive practice in tasks can be augmented.

For Ellis's task criterion of outcomes, figure 1 displays the occurrence of assessable forms of content in the "tasks" of units eight, nine, and ten. In particular, instructors can assess how well students have listened for specific details for the analyzed tasks as explained in the analysis of Ellis's criteria of linguistic skills. However, there is an absence of clearly defined *communicative* outcomes in the listening activities of units nine and ten, which Richards, Platt, and Weber (1985) and Crookes (1986) advocate for. Regarding the teaching of listening, it is difficult for instructors to fully understand how well learners have internalized content. It is through student output, such as confirmation checks, student writing, and comprehension questions, that teachers are able to gauge student understanding of listening content. Specifically, communicative outcomes are also a vital aspect of tasks, and *Interchange* (2005a) presents a communicative outcome as mentioned previously in unit eight. On the other hand, this involves the discussion of a single short question between pairs of learners, which is not an across-the-board assessable form of content by the instructor. From this observation, in level-three analysis, I suggest *personalization* of tasks. For instance, teachers can provide learners with opportunities to express their opinions or relate the listening selection to their native culture in a meaningful manner. For example, if learners write down the opinions

of their class members, it becomes an assessable form of communicative outcome. In another situation, the teacher could examine whether or not the students have properly utilized the grammar point or vocabulary the lesson stresses. Assessable forms of communicative content are necessary for language learning tasks in that they provide teachers a view of what students have learned from the task.

Conclusion

Littlejohn (1998) states that analysis makes transparent "mismatches between aims and the actual nature of the materials" (p. 202). In other words, task analysis is a means of rectifying over-generalized statements in EFL coursebooks. Consequently, do the "tasks" in the EFL coursebook *Interchange* (2005a) meet the conception of tasks by researchers? This paper reveals that there are areas of adaptation and enhancement to be made for listening "tasks" in the coursebook in regard to Ellis (2003) six criteria of tasks in TBL. More importantly, the major issue at hand is that greater understanding of tasks by instructors facilitates enhancement of materials. To explain this further, it is first with recognition of concerns that adaptation can take place. It is important to note that although the listening "tasks" in *Interchange* (2005a) do not quite correspond to all six of the task criteria outlined by Ellis (2003), they can be altered to do so, as explained in this paper's level-three task analysis for each criterion. For instructors who wish to make use of TBL in their courses, stronger awareness of task criteria is essential for coursebook adaptation and enhancement.

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Appendix

Nine researchers' definitions of tasks in TBL as compiled by Ellis (2003).

Breen (1989)
a "structured plan for the provision of opportunities for the refinement of knowledge and capabilities entailed in a new language and its use during communication."
Long (1985)
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, weighting a patient, sorting letters, taking a hotel reservation, writing a cheque, 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. 'Tasks' are the things people will tell you they do if you ask them and they are not applied linguists."
Richards, Platt, and Weber (1985)
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, and 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 teaching more communicative ... since it provides a purpose for classroom activity which goes beyond practice of language for its own sake."
Crookes (1986)
"a piece of work or an activity, usually with a specified objective, undertaken as a part of an educational course, at work, or used to elicit data for research."
Prabhu (1987)
an "activity which required learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allowed teachers to control and regulate that process."
Nunan (1989)
'a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right."
Skehan (1996)
'an activity in which: meaning is primary; there is some sort of relationship to the real world: task completion has some priority; and the assessment of task performance is in terms of task outcome.'
Lee (2000)
"(1) a classroom activity or exercise that has: (a) an objective obtainable only by the interaction among participants, (b) a mechanism for structuring and sequencing interaction, and (c) a focus on meaning exchange; (2) a language learning endeavor that requires learners to comprehend, manipulate, and/or produce the target language as they perform some set of workplans."

Bygate, Skehan, and Swain (2001)
an "activity which requires learners to use language, with an emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective."

Ellis (2003, pp. 4−5)