

ANALYSING LEARNING TASKS: MATERIALS FOR TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

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Resumo

Neste texto são apresentados uma grelha de análise e um instrumento de observação de aulas, desenvolvidos no âmbito do Grupo de Trabalho - Pedagogia para a Autonomia e da supervisão do ano de estágio dos alunos da Licenciatura em Ensino de Português- Inglês da Universidade do Minho, no ano lectivo de 1999/2000.

As autoras desenvolveram dois instrumentos focalizados na descrição/ avaliação de tarefas de ensino/ aprendizagem da língua estrangeira num enquadramento de uma abordagem comunicativa da língua e de uma pedagogia centrada no aluno e no desenvolvimento da sua autonomia.

Ao desenvolver as capacidades de análise de materiais didácticos e de reflexão sobre a sua implementação na sala de aula, este dois instrumentos facilitaram a promoção de capacidades de elaboração das próprias actividades didácticas nas professoras estagiárias, o que constitui uma dimensão relevante ao desenvolvimento profissional do professor.

Abstract

The present text presents a grid and an observation schedule for the analysis and implementation of foreign language learning tasks, which take into account both a communicative approach and the development of learners' autonomy. These two instruments were developed within the context of the work being done by *Working Group - Pedagogy for Autonomy* and the supervision of student teachers from the University of Minho, in the school year of 1999/2000.

By requiring student teachers to analyse language learning materials and reflect on aspects of its implementation in the classroom, these two instruments helped them design their own language learning tasks, suited to their own pedagogical purposes. Thus their professional development as language teachers was enhanced.

Introduction

The purpose of this text is to present a grid and an observation schedule for the analysis of foreign language learning tasks, within a framework of a communicative approach and a pedagogy for autonomy.

Both instruments were first presented in Ferreira & Moreira (2001) and were developed within the context of the pedagogical supervision of a group of EFL student teachers at the University of Minho in 1999/2000. As supervisors of that group of teachers (the university and the school supervisor, respectively), the authors diagnosed some problems with the course book materials being used, namely an overwhelming focus on the development of grammatical competence (disregarding other competences) and a strong structural approach to language teaching, which tended to limit both teaching and learning approaches. Furthermore, these teachers were developing small action research projects under the theme 'A Pedagogy for Autonomy' as part of the supervision project implemented by a group of university supervisors (see Marques & Paiva in this volume).

As members of the GT-PA, the authors constructed a grid for the analysis of language learning tasks, which was to be used by the student teachers. The grid should integrate some criteria regarded as essential for the promotion of learner-centred learning towards the development of learner autonomy. It should also make explicit some critical criteria for implementing a communicative approach to language learning, for the course books did not take this into account either. The grid was then tested by the student teachers, who initially used it to analyse and evaluate the tasks in the course book or other materials in use, and later to improve the tasks, by adding, deleting or reformulating activities. An observation schedule was designed to help us reflect on the implementation of the approach.

1. Grid for the analysis of foreign language learning tasks

Both the grid (Figure 1) and the observation schedule feature eight criteria that integrate a communicative approach and a pedagogy for autonomy: Focus, Purpose, Explicitness, Contextualisation, Motivation, Interaction, Self-direction, and Monitoring. When filling in the grid, the user should point out the presence or absence of these criteria.

The column labelled *Task* is intended to identify the language learning steps. The term 'task' is preferred to 'activity' because the former is conceptually more appropriate to refer to a sequence of activities which focus on the development of one or more skill areas of variable extension and whose purpose and internal coherence can be identified by the user or by the author. We can identify 5 elements as the components of the task¹: *purposes* (the intentions or goals underlying the task); *input* (the linguistic or non-linguistic information which is the starting point to the task); *activities* (specification of what the learners should do with the input); *context* (social organization - group/peer/individual work, and material arrangements - in and/or outside the

classroom), and *learner and teacher roles* (the contribution of the participants to the task, the assumptions on which the task is based, as well as the character of the social and interpersonal relationships among learners and teachers).

The column labelled *Focus* identifies the object of the task, which can be the development of the learner's *communicative competence* (CC) and/or his/her *learning competence* (LC), in their various subcompetences (linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, strategic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, etc.).

The column *Purpose* identifies the pedagogical purpose of the task: *reflection* (on the foreign language and/or the learning process) and/or *practice* (of the foreign language and/or the learning strategies).

In the column *Explicitness* one has to decide whether *purpose* and/or *demands* of the task are clear- what does the learner learn, how should the task be carried out in order to fulfil its purpose, and what strategies and resource materials should be used?

The column *Contextualisation* refers to "authenticity" of communication and/or language learning; whether the task responds to the learner's personal characteristics, interests and needs; whether it promotes relevant learning according to his/her level, age, sociocultural background; whether it involves capacities that can be transferred to other learning situations, etc.

The column *Motivation* refers to the expected learner's willingness and readiness to carry out the task: whether it allows for the expression of opinions, ideas, feelings and personal experiences, whether it provides enjoyment and pleasure, whether it is appropriate to learner's level of achievement, etc.

In the column *Interaction* one should indicate whether the task promotes collaborative learning, involving the development of cooperation and peer support (student-student interaction) or the sharing of information/ideas with the teacher (student-teacher interaction).

The column *Self-direction* addresses whether the task permits choices, whether it allows the learner to take initiatives or make decisions (deciding upon content, way of implementing the task, use of other resource materials, learning strategies, etc.)

Figure 1: Grid for the analysis of foreign language learning tasks

Teacher: _____ Material: _____ School Year: _____

↑ Point out the presence (√) or absence (X) of the criterion

Task	Focus		Purpose		Explicitness		Contextualisation	Motivation	Interaction		Self-direction	Monitoring		Notes
	CC	LC	Reflect	Practice	Purpose	Task demands			St-St	St-T		CC	LC	
1.														
2.														
3.														
4.														

In the column *Monitoring* it should be pointed out whether the task involves the learner in self-assessment (concerning attitudes, representations, knowledge, strategies, progress, learning outcomes, etc.), whether it allows for the correction of work of oneself or one's peers, or the assessment of the didactic process (aims, activities, materials, evaluation, roles, etc.).

The column *Notes* is aimed at recording any other relevant aspect of task analysis, such as the use of the mother tongue, alternative ways of implementing the task, time needed, resource materials, etc.

The grid should allow for the analysis of several tasks (four, in this case) not only to facilitate comparison among them but also to get a clearer idea of their teaching approach. Though the grid is not meant to be filled in descriptively, we show an example of how the above criteria can be met (see Appendix 1), with a task designed by the student teachers by taking them into account².

2. Observation schedule for the implementation of foreign language learning tasks

When used within the context of pedagogical supervision, we recommend that it should be accompanied by the "Observation Schedule for the Implementation of Foreign Language Learning Tasks" (Figure 2). This observation schedule was designed to complement the grid and it is aimed at observing the way the teacher develops the task with his/her students. It allows for the observation of two tasks and contains the same criteria (though with a different formulation) as the grid. The observer(s) should point out the presence or absence of each criterion and use the column *Notes* for comments about the steps of the task, how the criteria are satisfied, problems that arise, and so forth.

This instrument proved to be useful in complementing the grid. Some criteria do not involve the material itself; they may apply in the course of the lesson, for example, when teachers and students decide what to do next (*self-direction*), when students work in pairs/groups (*interaction/collaboration*), when teachers discuss with students the value of the tasks (*explicitness of purpose*), when students talk about problems with language/ learning strategies (*monitoring*), and so on.

Figure 2: Observation schedule for the implementation of foreign language learning tasks

OBSERVING FL LEARNING TASKS

Teacher: _____
 Date: _____
 Class: _____
 X - Criterion absent

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The task focuses on the development of communicative competence ➤ The task focuses on the development of learning competence ➤ The task aims at reflecting on learning the language / learning to learn the language ➤ The task aims at practising the language/ learning to learn the language ➤ The pedagogical purpose of the task is explicit for the learner ➤ The task demands are explicit for the learner ➤ The task is "authentic" from both a communicative and learning point of view ➤ The task motivates the learner ➤ The task promotes collaboration among learners ➤ The task promotes collaboration with the teacher ➤ The task allows the learners to take initiatives and make decisions ➤ The task involves the learner in self-assessment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> √ X √ X √ X √ X √ X √ X √ X √ X √ X √ X √ X √ X 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The task focuses on the development of communicative competence ➤ The task focuses on the development of learning competence ➤ The task aims at reflecting on learning the language / learning to learn the language ➤ The task aims at practising the language/ learning to learn the language ➤ The pedagogical purpose of the task is explicit for the learner ➤ The task demands are explicit for the learner ➤ The task is "authentic" from both a communicative and learning point of view ➤ The task motivates the learner ➤ The task promotes collaboration among learners ➤ The task promotes collaboration with the teacher ➤ The task allows the learners to take initiatives and make decisions ➤ The task involves the learner in self-assessment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> √ X √ X √ X √ X √ X √ X √ X √ X √ X √ X √ X √ X 	

This schedule, along with the grid, helped student teachers realise that the material does not have to make all the criteria explicit; it also helped them to plan the lesson, by thinking about instructions or about checking stages, anticipating several forms of interaction, and reflecting on pedagogical discourse.

3. Outcome

Both instruments proved valuable for our teacher development purposes: by requiring the student teachers to develop a more critical view of material in and beyond the course book, these instruments helped promote their autonomy as language teachers. They became increasingly more capable of designing their own material to fit their own pedagogical purposes.

In their EFL methodology classes before the teaching practice year, the student teachers had learnt the theory for developing a pedagogy for autonomy, had seen some sample materials, and were even willing to try out the approach. By making them analyse and reflect upon language learning tasks, the material we developed helped them conceptualise and implement it, with a growing sense of self-direction and self-fulfilment.

Notes

¹ After Nunan, David (1989), *Designing tasks for the communicative classroom*, Cambridge: C.U.P. This author separates the learner's role from the teacher's role, presenting therefore 6 elements that constitute the task.

² The material was originally presented to pupils in Portuguese, for they were beginners and false beginners.

References

- FERREIRA, P. & MOREIRA, M.A. (2001). "Grelha de análise de tarefas de ensino/aprendizagem da língua estrangeira". In F. Vieira (org.), *Cadernos 2. Grupo de Trabalho - Pedagogia para a Autonomia*. Braga: Universidade do Minho.
- PEREIRA, A.; ALMEIDA, S.; Costa, S. & FERRAZ, L. (2001). "Aprender a aprender - propostas didácticas". In F. Vieira (org.), *Cadernos 2. Grupo de Trabalho - Pedagogia para a Autonomia*. Braga: Universidade do Minho.

**Appendix 1: Analysing foreign language learning tasks: an example
(in Pereira, Almeida, Costa & Ferraz, 2001)**

Learning about writing

1. Read carefully the following texts about the theme: "My house".

TEXT A

My house is big and comfortable. It has got three big rooms, a kitchen and a big living room. My bedroom is very comfortable the walls are white and the bed is near the window. The living room is big it has got yellow walls and a big carpet. My bedroom has got some posters on the wall and a CD player. This is my room.

TEXT B

This is my house. It is in a quiet street in the suburbs of London. It's a big white house with a gate and it has got two floors: a ground floor and a first floor. There is an attic and a basement. There is a lovely garden with many flowers in front of the house. On the right there is a garage. On the ground floor there is a hall a kitchen and next to it a pantry. There is a big living room and a toilet on the left. Upstairs there are three bedrooms and a bathroom. In the attic there are some toys and an old piano.

TEXT C

I live in a big block of flats in one of the quiet suburbs of London.

My flat is upstairs, on the fourth floor of a modern building. The entrance is on the ground floor and the garage is on the basement. It is big and comfortable and the balcony looks onto the garden.

Our house has got four bedrooms, two bathrooms, a toilet, a living room, a dining room and a kitchen.

My favourite room is my bedroom because the walls are orange and I have some posters of my pop star idols on the wall. There is also a single bed, a bedside table with a lamp on it, a wardrobe and a chest of drawers for my clothes, a desk and a chair for me to do my homework.

I am lucky because my aunt Julie and my uncle Tom live next door, so I can play with my cousins.

I enjoy living here! This is "My dream house"!

2. Working in groups, compare these texts using the following criteria:

- ⇒ Richness and variety of vocabulary;
- ⇒ Structure and organisation (well-structured, well-punctuated sentences, division into paragraphs, organisation of ideas in logical parts, etc.);
- ⇒ Creativity and originality;
- ⇒ Grammatical accuracy;
- ⇒ Quantity of information.

3. Imagine you are going to write a text to be published in the school newspaper. Which are the most important criteria? Justify your response.

Writing about you

4. Write a composition about the theme “My dream room” to be published in the school newspaper. Follow these steps:

- ⇒ Think about the theme and write the main ideas.
- ⇒ Choose the vocabulary you are going to use.
- ⇒ Organise your ideas, according to the structure of the text.
- ⇒ Show your scheme to your colleague and ask for further suggestions.
- ⇒ When you finish, read your text and re-write it, if necessary.

5. Now exchange your text with your colleague's and correct it according to the criteria you selected in 3.

5.1 Organise an "error code" that may be similar to this one:

VOC	Vocabulary
GR	Grammar
V	Verb
//	Paragraph
/	Pause
WO	Word Order
?	Confusing
SS	Sentence Structure
SP	Spelling
...	Something missing
P	Punctuation
	Delete
U	No need for a new sentence. Join the ideas.

5.2 Choose a scale for marking (*poor, fair, very good / a mark out of 20...*)

6. After completing this task, write your opinion about:

<p>Why did we do this activity?</p>	<p>Did you enjoy the activity? Did you have problems? I found the activity:</p>	<p>Did you learn anything? Did you find something new, interesting or useful? What was new for me:</p>
<p>The purpose of this activity was:</p>	<p>What I liked most was: It was difficult to: What could be different:</p>	<p>What was new for me: This activity helped me to: This activity was not very useful to me because:</p>
<p>The purpose of this activity was:</p>	<p>I found the activity: What I liked most was: It was difficult to: What could be different:</p>	<p>What was new for me: This activity helped me to: This activity was not very useful to me because:</p>

(Adapted from: Flávia Viciara, (1998). A autonomia na aprendizagem da língua estrangeira. Braga: CEEP - IEP - UM)

Task analysis (according to the grid for the analysis of foreign language learning tasks)

Task	Focus	Purpose	Explicitness	Contextualisation	Motivation	Interaction	Self-direction	Monitoring	Notes
<i>Learning about writing</i>	CC: Discourse competence (analysing/ understanding/ producing written text)	R: Writing process (structure/ marking criteria; problems)	P: Awareness of writing process; reflecting on task goals	Appropriateness of content/ task to level/ SS' needs	High, mainly due to SS' needs + peer correction	S-S: Steps 2, 4, 5 S-T: After each step, discussing with T	Deciding how to carry out steps 4 & 5	CC: Using guidelines; correcting written production LC: Identifying purpose + assessing performance on task (preferences strengths and problems)	Task was carried out in 3 lessons; heavy use of MT because SS were beginners/ false beginners. Step 1 could be analysing problems with text + rewriting it
(Language awareness stage + written practice + assessment)	LC: Didactic/ intra/ inter-personal competence (awareness of writing process; assessing performance on task, identifying learning preferences, problems; working with others)	P: Writing a personal text; correcting text	TD: Analysis of model/ collaborating; asking for/ giving examples of possible responses						
<i>Italics: Not in the material; done in class</i>	CC: Communicative Competence LC: Learning Competence	R: Reflection P: Practice	P: Purpose TD: Task Demands			S-S: Student S-T: Student-Teacher		CC: Communicative Competence LC: Learning Competence	