Introduction

Since the 1970s, a number of researchers in the areas of second language acquisition and language pedagogy have discussed, and proposed, alternatives to the choice of traditionally defined linguistic units of syllabus content and sequence (Widdowson, 1978). Emanating from the work of the Council of Europe in the 60s, the first wave of the communicative 'revolution' was based on the idea of grouping bits of language according to communicative functions. The second wave of the communicative 'revolution', however, really took off by the early 80s, mostly radiating out from the UK. The key principle was the separation of classroom work into ‘accuracy’ work and ‘fluency’ work; accuracy work was for concentrating on learning new bits of language (grammar patterns, functional exponents, vocabulary, etc); fluency work was for getting the students to speak freely (say in discussions). The emergence of the task-based approach, which is a kind of communicative language teaching, was also in the 80s and has been solidly part of Business English teaching. It was not until the mid-90s that it became much more established in General English teaching (Nunan, 2001).

Very considerable amount of attention and focus has been given nowadays to Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). Researchers in the field of applied linguistics and educational linguistics have come to a realization of the usefulness of applying this approach in language teaching. The first International Conference on Task-Based Language Teaching was held Leuven-Belgium in 2005. This conference brought together applied linguists and educational linguists to reflect on the potential of TBLT for promoting first, second, and foreign language acquisition. Special attention was paid to the implementation of TBLT into the classroom. Besides exploring the theoretical rationale behind task-based language teaching, this conference focused on what needs to be done (in terms of teacher training, syllabus and curriculum development, development of assessment tools, etc.) to make TBLT ‘work’ in the real world (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven,
The second International Conference on TBLT will take place in Hawaii in 2007. The theme of the 2007 conference is "TBLT: Putting Principles to Work".

The aim of this paper is two-fold: (i) reviewing the literature on TBLT and highlighting the very important aspects relevant to this method of language teaching, and (ii) evaluating the content of Saudi intermediate-level English textbooks in terms of the use of TBLT and inclusion of different kinds of tasks. To achieve the two goals of the paper, it has been divided into two parts. In Part I, entitled "Review of Literature", different issues on TBLT are explained. Section 1 of this part starts with a definition and discussion of the term 'task'. It focuses on the different meanings that have been offered for this term and different views of it. Then, in Section 2, the focus is shifted towards the method of teaching that incorporates tasks to achieve communicative ability (i.e. TBLT). It discusses the different proposals offered and different projects launched. Section 3 discusses three different task designs discussed in the literature; namely, planned versus unplanned; open versus closed; and one-way versus two-way tasks. This is followed by an explanation of what is meant by task familiarity and the correlation between it and learners' progress in Section 4. This part concludes with a listing of the advantages and problems with TBLT that have been stressed in the literature.

Part II, entitled "Evaluation of Intermediate-Level English Textbooks in Saudi Arabia", investigates Saudi intermediate-level English textbooks to evaluate the use of tasks in their design. It is divided into three sections with each section focusing on a year of the three intermediate years. That is, Section 1 evaluates the use of tasks in the first intermediate year; Section 2 evaluates the second intermediate year; and Section 3 evaluates the third intermediate year. In each section, examples are given with comments and observations based on the literature on TBLT.
Part I: Review of Literature

1. Definition of 'task'

A language teacher and learner must understand the ultimate distinction between task, exercise and activity. Nunan (2001) explains that a task is a communicative act that does not usually have a restrictive focus on a single grammatical structure. It also has a non-linguistic outcome. An exercise usually has a restrictive focus on a single language element, and has a linguistic outcome. An activity also has a restrictive focus on one or two language items, but also has a communicative outcome. In that sense, activities have something in common with tasks and something in common with exercises. However, Ellis (2004) distinguishes between focused and unfocused tasks. He explains that focused tasks are those which "can be employed to elicit use of specific linguistic features, either by design or by use of methodological procedures that focus attention on form in the implementation of a task" whereas unfocused tasks are those which "are not designed with the intention of eliciting linguistic features" (p. 141).

Different approaches to the selection of tasks are recognized. In the literature, there is a distinction between real-world or target tasks, which refer to the uses of language in the world beyond the classroom, and pedagogic tasks, which occur in the classroom. Long (1985) defines (target) task using its everyday, nontechnical meaning as:

a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward. Thus, examples of tasks include painting a fence, dressing a child, filling out a form, buying a pair of shoes, making an airline reservation, borrowing a library book, taking a driving test, typing a letter, weighing a patient, sorting letters, taking a hotel reservation, writing a check, finding a street destination and helping someone across a road. In other words, by 'task' is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play, and in between. Tasks are the things people will tell you they
do if you ask them and they are not applied linguists (p. 89).

Similarly, Crookes (1986) regards it as:

a piece of work or an activity, usually with a specified objective, 
undertaken as part of an educational course, or at work (p. 1).

When these tasks are transformed from the real world to the class, they 
become pedagogical. Breen (1987) offers a definition of a pedagogical task as 
follows:

…. any structured language learning endeavor which has a 
particulate objective, appropriate content, a specified working 
procedure, and a range of outcomes for those who undertake the 
task. 'Task' is therefore assumed to refer to a range of work plans 
which have the overall purposes of facilitating language learning – 
from the simple and brief exercise type, to more complex and 
lengthy activities such as group problem-solving or simultaneous 
and decision- making (p. 23).

Nunan (2004) offers a more specific definition of pedagogic tasks:

…. a pedagogical task is a piece of classroom work that involves learners in 
comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the 
target language while their attention is focused in mobilizing their 
grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning and in which 
the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form 
(p. 4).

2. Task-Based Language Teaching

The content of teaching in the task-based approach is a series of complex 
and purposeful tasks that the students want or need to perform with the language 
they are learning (Nunan, 1988). They represent a particular realization of 
communicative language teaching. Instead of beginning the design process with
lists of grammatical, functional-notional, and other items, the designer of a task-based syllabus conducts a needs analysis which yields a list of the target tasks that the targeted learners will need to carry out in the 'real world' outside the classroom (Nunan, 2001). Examples of target tasks include: taking part in a job interview, completing a credit card application, finding one’s way from a hotel to a subway station, checking into a hotel, and so forth.

One particular proposal which has been widely promoted is Prabhu's 'Bangalore Project' (Nunan, 1988). Prabhu's definition of task for the purposes of the Bangalore project was fairly abstract and oriented towards cognition, process and (teacher-fronted) pedagogy:

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, was regarded as a 'task'. (Prabhu, 1987, p. 24)

In this project, three task types, information-gap activity, reasoning-gap activity and opinion-gap activity, are used so that the learner would perceive the language subconsciously whilst consciously concentrating on solving the meaning behind the tasks (Rabbini, 2002). A task-based approach assumes that speaking a language is a skill best perfected through practice and interaction, and uses tasks and activities to encourage learners to use the language communicatively in order to achieve a purpose. Tasks must be relevant to the real world language needs of the student. That is, the underlying learning theory of task based and communicative language teaching seems to suggest that activities in which language is employed to complete meaningful tasks, enhances learning.

Task-based syllabuses utilizing such conceptions of task require a needs identification to be conducted in terms of the real-world target tasks learners are preparing to undertake. Once target tasks have been identified via the needs analysis, the next step is to classify them into (target) task types. For example, in a course for trainee flight attendants, the serving of breakfast, lunch, dinner, and
snacks and refreshments might be classified as serving food and beverages. Pedagogical tasks are then derived from the task types and sequenced to form the task-based syllabus (Long & Crookes, 1992).

3. Task Design

Three concepts from the literature on tasks were highlighted by Long (1990) as important variables in task design. These concepts are:

(1) Planned/unplanned: whether an activity provides time for learners to plan the language they will speak or write;
(2) Open/closed: whether learners believe there is one right answer or many possible right answers; and
(3) One-way/two-way: whether students need to exchange information to complete the task, and, if so, if the information flows from only one group member or if all must contribute information.

3.1. Planned versus Unplanned

In activities with planning, students are given time alone to decide what to say before they interact with other members of their groups. In activities without planning, students immediately interact with the members of their group without time alone to plan what to say or the language to use to say it.

An example of a task with planning would be one in which students are given a discussion topic and have 10 minutes to prepare what they will say before the discussion begins. An example of a task without planning would be one in which students are asked to discuss a controversial issue but are given no time to plan what to say before they start to discuss with the other members of the group. Long (1990) suggested that providing opportunities to plan can increase the quantity and quality of the language learners generate.
3.2. Open versus Closed

Closed activities are ones for which students know there is a correct answer or small set of answers which the teacher (or some other person to whom their answer will be told) expects them to produce. Thus, the teacher can say that an answer is right or wrong. An example of a closed task is one in which students are asked to identify referents after reading a text. Open tasks, conversely, are those for which there is no one correct answer or answers; everyone can have their own opinion. An answer is neither right nor wrong; it depends on one's point of view or experience. An example of an open task is one in which learners discuss their views on a controversial issue, e.g., women driving cars in Saudi Arabia.

Long (1990) contended that when learners know there is only one or only a small set of possible correct outcomes, they are more likely to engage in negotiation of meaning (actions taken to be sure that communication has been successful) among their group members, because group members try to find the correct answer, rather than settling for any answer, and this tends to stimulate interaction. Negotiation of meaning is seen as important by Long and others because it increases the comprehensibility of the language students hear and the need for learners to produce language which others can comprehend (Swain, 1985). On the other hand, others, such as de Bono (1973), might argue that open tasks foster development of thinking skills and creativity.

3.3. One-way versus Two-ways

Required information exchange refers to whether the activity is constructed so that group members need to share information in order to complete a task. If a group is asked to read a text and answer a set of comprehension questions, there is no information exchange required because each group member possesses a copy of the text and a copy of the questions: all the information they need. Each student can obtain the information they need alone without the others' help. So, one group member could complete the task alone if the other group members suddenly fell ill and left the room.
In other group activities information exchange is required, because an information gap exists in which not all group members hold the same information. There are two types of information gap activities: one-way and two-way. One-way occurs when one person holds information which other group member(s) do not have. An example of a one-way information exchange is one in which one person has a picture and describes it to their partner who tries to draw it. A two-way information gap occurs when each group member holds unique information, e.g., jigsaw activities. An example of jigsaw is when each member of a group receives a different part of the text. They need to tell each other the information in their unique piece of the text and then do a task which requires information from all the pieces.

Both one-way and two-way information exchange activities involve an information gap in that information must flow between group members in order for the task to be completed. The difference lies in whether each group member needs to send as well as receive information in order to complete the activity.

4. Task Familiarity

It is important to note that task familiarity has been interpreted from different points of view and in slightly different ways. By task familiarity, Foster and Skehan (1996, p. 311) meant the general conditions under which a task is performed. They showed that being familiar with task type does not lead to improved performance. In his study on task complexity, Robinson (2001a) interpreted familiarity in terms of content (familiarity with a route marked in a map) and differentiated his experimental map tasks according to whether learners were familiar or unfamiliar with the area they were supposed to describe. Finally, Bygate (1999) also talks about tasks as triggering different more or less familiar language patterns or discourse genres.

Hence, task familiarity can be interpreted as referring to the task type, task topic, or task discourse genre. From an interactionist, negotiation-of-meaning perspective, Plough and Gass (1993) compared the performance of two groups,
one of which was familiar with a particular task type and one that was not. The
tasks used in the study were an information-gap task (Spot the difference) and a
consensus-type task (Who will survive?). They predicted that familiarity would
cause more negotiation of meaning than non-familiarity with tasks. Clarification
requests, confirmation checks, back channel cues, overlaps and interruptions, and
sentence completion episodes were counted. Although they did not obtain strong
empirical support for their claims, they found that the task-familiar group used
more clarification requests and confirmation checks. Their interpretation was that
task familiarity fosters a non-threatening environment that encourages learners to
negotiate meaning. They also found, however, that the task-unfamiliar group was
more highly involved in the task completion process as shown by the number of
interruptions. They concluded that novelty of task type may encourage higher
involvement. This was not confirmed by Foster and Skehan (1996), who showed
that familiarity with the task, understood as familiarity with general task
conditions, does not lead to improved performance.

5. Advantages of TBLT

Among the advantages of using a task-based approach to language teaching
is that it:

1. allows for a needs analysis, thus allowing course content to be matched to
   identified learners' needs.

2. is supported by a large body of empirical evidence, thus allowing decisions
   regarding materials design and methodology to be based on the research
   findings of classroom-centered language learning (Rooney, 2000).

3. allows for form-focused instruction. There is considerable evidence (Long,
   1985), particularly from research studies which have compared naturalistic L2
   learners to instructed L2 learners, that form-focused instruction within a
   communicative context can be beneficial.

6. Problems with TBLT

TBLT is not without problems of its own, the following are some; there are
no doubt others.
1. Its research base is limited, and some of the second language acquisition and classroom research findings may bear alternative interpretations, given the small scale and questionable methodology of some of the studies involved (Long & Crookes, 1992).

2. Given an adequate needs analysis, selection of tasks is relatively straightforward. Assessing task difficulty and sequencing pedagogic tasks are more problematic. Little empirical support is not yet available for the various proposed parameters of task classification and difficulty, nor has much of an effort been made to define some of them in operational terms (Nunan, 2001). Identification of valid, user-friendly sequencing criteria remains one of the oldest unsolved problems in language teaching of all kinds (Widdowson, 1990).

3. There is also the problem of finiteness. That is, how many tasks and task types are there? Where does one task end and the next begin? How many levels of analysis are needed? What hierarchical relationships exist between one level and another? (Long & Crookes, 1992).

4. A few programs have been reported that reflect some principles of TBLT, although often within a different, content-based ESL framework (Rooney, 2000), and classroom studies have been conducted of several issues in such programs, but no complete program has been implemented and subjected to the kind of rigorous, controlled evaluation required.
Part II: Evaluation of Intermediate-Level English Textbooks in Saudi Arabia

English in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a second language; high scores of proficiency in English are required to obtain certain jobs and to be admitted to certain colleges in universities, and a certain command of the language is even required in daily use when interacting with non-speakers of Arabic; the first language in the country. English is included in the curriculum of private schools as early as the first year. However, it is not until the intermediate-level (i.e. seventh grade) that English is taught obligatorily in governmental schools.

The design of teaching in intermediate-level textbooks "Say It In English" is based on language functions. That is, each unit sets the teaching of a topic and certain language functions as its objective. Moran (1990) includes the following examples of language functions: greetings, leave takings, interrupting, apologizing, answering the door, begging, refusing, declining an offer, offering help, requesting help, consoling, thanking, warning, making an introduction, responding to an introduction, asking directions, complimenting, expressing condolences, extending an invitation, expressing distaste, answering the telephone, expressing delight, expressing displeasure, congratulating, expressing pain, expressing fear, requesting permission, getting someone's attention, asking for repetition, expressing ignorance, encouraging, accusing, seeking reassurance, expressing fear, remembering, welcoming, asking about health, requesting permission to speak, reprimanding, expressing disappointment, expressing affection, and calming someone down. Functions of this sort are the basis of teaching English in the intermediate-level in Saudi Arabia. Thus, the kind of syllabus adopted is the functional-notional syllabus. Throughout each unit there are sections of grammar, listening, reading and writing. As articulated in the introduction of each of the textbooks, the aim is to enable learners to use the language communicatively. Therefore, in each unit of the three textbooks there is an application of certain types of tasks set as to promote the communicative ability of learners.

In the following, I will attempt to evaluate the content of Saudi English intermediate-level textbooks "Say It In English" in terms of the application of
TBLT and inclusion of tasks, whatever their design. Each of the three-year textbooks will be investigated to depict the application of TBLT in their design. Then, examples of tasks used in these textbooks will be introduced and evaluated in terms of their suitability and compatibility with the general framework of teaching used in the design of these textbooks and proficiency-level of the learners. The observation and evaluation will be based on the most recent findings in the literature on TBLT.

1. The First Year

To some learners, this may be the first time they have ever been introduced to English in a learning context. Some, however, may have a background in English whether through studying it abroad or in private schools. Thus, the content of this course is designed for beginners. As mentioned above, the course is based upon language functions with sections in each unit allocated for different language components and skills. It generally seeks to enhance the communicative ability of the learners. Reference to tasks is made in each unit with a non-restrictive focus on a particular linguistic outcome.

*Example 1 (Unit 1 p. 7)*

The title of Unit 1 is *Good Morning*. As it is the first unit being taught to learners who are said to be beginners, the objectives are very simple; they include teaching ways of greeting people and introducing one's self in addition to asking for phone numbers. The unit starts with relevant listening activities gradually designed as to familiarize learners with ways through which people introduce themselves in English. These start with very simple exchanges to more complex conversations. After that, learners listen to self-introducing conversations followed by a controlled task requiring learners, in pairs, to make similar conversations. The task is as follows:

**Listening**

A. Listen and put the conversation in order.
   - Nice to meet you, Nouf.
   - Hi, Sabah. My name is Nouf Al-Ameen.
Hello, I'm Sabah Al-Ali.

B. In Pairs: Make similar conversations.

Comment

This is a primitive planned, closed, two-way task. Learners are given time to 'plan' for the task as they listen to the conversation and organize it. Although there are many different ways of introducing one's self in English and all are accepted, this task is closed because it does not allow for uncontrolled answers that may be irrelevant. That is, it is not that type of task that depends on argument on a controversial issue for which the learner may express him/herself openly as long as arguments are justified. Finally, it is a two-way rather than a one-way task for the flow of information is required from two parties for the task to be completed. On the other hand, the task is pedagogical in the sense that it is applied in the classroom setting, but is still authentic as it is derived from a real-world situation. What can be noted about the task is that it is controlled to the extent that it could be categorized as an imitation activity rather than a task, but as long as it involves a change in the conversation, it is said to be a task that is compatible with the proficiency-level of the learners.

An important observation to be mentioned is that the design of the textbook in this unit, as well as other units, is that it is not oriented towards task-based language teaching. Yet, the designers have made use of tasks to accomplish communicative competence having certain topics as their starting point.

Example 2 (Unit 6 p. 56)

Unit 6 is under the title 'My House'. With little progress in the proficiency-level of learners compared with unit 1, learners are expected by the end of this unit to have the ability to name rooms in their houses, describe their houses, talk about things they do in their houses and say where things are. The unit starts with introducing learners to new lexicon relevant to the topic (bathroom, bedroom, dining room, downstairs, upstairs, etc.) and listening activities that have to do with the topic in addition to the explanation of certain grammatical structures. Then,
they are expected to complete a task in which a map is drawn and the first learner chooses a place on the map and describes it while the second guesses the place. The task is as follows:

Speaking

In pairs: Guess the place.

Student A: Choose a place on the map.

Try to describe its location to your partner.

Student B: Guess the place.

e.g.: Student A: Where are you?

    Student B: I'm opposite the hotel.

    Student A: So you're at the boy's school.

Comment

This is a planned, closed, two-way task. It allows learners time to plan for their production; it only allows for a restricted number of answers that can be said to be correct; and the flow of information involves more than one learner. It is a kind of an information-gap activity. That is, part of the information is absent and another learner's input is required to fill the missing gap. It is a pedagogical task that is derived from a real world situation; describing locations is one important communicative aspect used frequently in real life. The usefulness of this task, when applied appropriately, is that it serves the objectives of the unit in terms of training learners how to describe locations as it involves practice which is very crucial in language learning. In other words, tasks are resorted to in order to guarantee a certain level of practice to develop communicative competence.

Example 3 (Unit 7 p. 66)

Unit 7 is under the title 'My Room'. The aim of this unit is to acquaint learners with the ability to name bedroom furniture and say where things are. As it is the case with most units, it starts with a vocabulary section introducing learners to vocabulary items that have to do with the topic of the unit. Thus it presents
words such as closet, curtain, dresser, king size bed, mirror, etc. Then listening activities that are designed as to achieve the goals of the unit (in this case naming bedroom furniture and saying where things are) are presented. After that, learners are expected to complete a task in which they are supposed to find missing objects in pictures. The task is as follows:

Speaking

In pairs: Find the missing objects.
Student A: turn to page 91.
Student B: turn to page 92.

On pages 91 and 92 there are two different pictures of the same living room. That is, there are objects missing in the picture of the living room on p. 91 which are present in the picture of the living room on p. 92, and vice versa. The first participant of the pair, say student A, is expected to ask his partner (student B) about the place of a particular object and student B would in turn describe its place while student A draws the object in the picture of the living room. Here is how the task is presented on pages 91 and 92 respectively.

You cannot find items 1-6 in picture A.
Item 1: mirror
Item 2: bag
Item 3: radio
Item 4: umbrella
Item 5: pen
Item 6: pillow
Ask your partner where they are. Draw the missing objects in the correct places in your pictures.

The same thing is required from student B, but with different missing items. The items missing in the picture on p. 92 are as follows:
Item 1: book
Item 2: ruler
Item 3: eraser
Item 4: ball
Item 5: socks
Item 6: cup

By the end of the task, the two participants are expected to have the same pictures with all 12 items present.

**Comment**

As noticed, this task involves more processing and interaction between pairs of learners than the previous tasks. Each learner takes part in asking about the place of a particular object, describing the place of the object and drawing it. Thus it involves both production and reception. The task is planned in the sense that learners realize that they will be involved in a task that primarily focuses on their ability to ask about the places of certain objects and describing and locating them; it is also closed in the sense that the range of answers that are acceptable is restricted; and it is a two-way task for the flow of information requires more than a single learner: it involves asking about the place of a particular object from one party and describing the place by the other. The gap of information requires from the learners a certain level of processing, concentration, input and output. The task involves activities that are required in real-world situations.

One very important thing to note is that the sequencing of tasks has been well dealt with in the course. Complexity of tasks has gradually increased in terms of content as well as the abilities required to complete a task. This is obvious when comparing, for example, the three tasks above.
2. The Second Year

The design of the syllabus for this year is also based on topics. Like the first year, the course is composed of units based on particular topics. In each unit there are sections allocated for different language components and skills. It generally seeks to enhance the communicative ability of the learners. Reference to tasks is made in each unit with a non-restrictive focus on a particular linguistic outcome in some cases, and with a restrictive focus on a particular linguistic outcome in other cases. The only difference between this year and the first year is that the topics, functions, skills, grammatical structures, exercises and tasks are a little more difficult than those in the first year. Speaking about task difficulty, Nunan (2004) stresses that determining task difficulty is problematic; however, he explains that a two-dimensional framework set by Brown, Anderson, Shilcock and Yule (1984) explains the issue of what makes a speaking tasks difficult. The first dimension has to do with the type of information that has to be conveyed. The second dimension concerns the scale of the task and the interrelationships among the different elements involved. These two dimensions are the issues on which I based my claim that the tasks in the first year are more difficult than those in the first year.

Example 1 (Unit 9 p. 3)

The title of this unit is 'On the Road'. It has as its objectives teaching learners how to ask for and give directions, give instructions, understand road signs, listen to people giving directions and following them on the map and reading about maps. After being introduced to prepositions of place and learning when to use them, learners are introduced to a map and asked to fill the blanks with prepositions of place. Then, in pairs, a learner chooses a location on the map and asks his/her partner how to get to that location. The partner will give the directions using prepositions of place. The task is as follows:

A. Look at the map and complete the sentences.

\[e.g.\]

A: Excuse me, is there a mosque \___ the post office?

B: Yes, there's one \___ the bridge. It's about a five-minute walk.
In pairs: Choose a location on the map. Ask your partner how to get there.
Your partner will give you directions. Use prepositions of place.

**Comment**

Map tasks are one of the most important tasks that have been frequently addressed in the literature on TBLT, and teachers are very strongly encouraged to apply this type of tasks. Learners in such tasks are involved in very much interaction that develops their communicative abilities. Moreover, they resemble authentic situations used outside the classroom. In this task, there is a focus on a particular linguistics outcome; namely, the use of prepositions of place. Hence, it is a *focused* task. However, the overall use of language is non-restrictive. Each learner in a pair would have the opportunity of practicing language related to asking about locations and describing them; thus, playing two different roles at the same time. In describing directions, both learners would be involved in an activity that requires them to be focused as one would try to use the language correctly to describe the location while the other would concentrate in an attempt to reach that location. This involves processing in which meaning is primary and that goes beyond the linguistic level. Another observation that ought to be mentioned here has to do with task familiarity. The good thing about the task, particularly the map, is that roads and locations on the map are familiar to the learners as they are merely from the Saudi context. This, in fact, enhances the production of learners who would not have to worry about being familiarized with locations that they may have never come through in their lives.

**Example 2 (Unit 11 p. 24)**

The title of Unit 11 is *At the Doctor's*. It aims at teaching learners how to talk about illness and health problems, give advice, and make appointments. After being introduced to enough input, whether from the teacher or through listening activities, there is an activity in which learners are asked to match kinds of illnesses with pictures so that they would be acquainted with the lexicon needed to talk about illnesses. After that, there is a task involving learners in pair discussion.
A member of each pair is required to choose an illness, describe it to his/her partner and the partner guesses the illness and gives an advice. The task is as follows:

A. Match the pictures with the words: chicken pox, sunstroke, food poisoning, swollen ankle, dizzy and cough.

B. In pairs: Choose an illness. Describe it to your partner (don't name it). Your partner guesses the illness and gives you advice.

Comment

The topic of this unit as mentioned above is 'At the Doctor's', and learners are expected, by the end of the unit, to acquire the language needed for health situations. Of course, the starting point of the unit is the topic, however, certain tasks, such as this one, are presented in order for learners to practice what they have been introduced to. Not only that, but the task itself is one that is authentic and that can be applied in situations outside the classroom. It is multi-fold in that it involves information-gap activity and opinion-gap activity besides guessing. Describing a particular illness to a partner is an information-gap activity while the advice given from the other participant is more an opinion-gap activity, and, in between, there is guessing. This indicates that the complexity of the tasks is being taken care of. In previous units, as the examples above show, tasks were less complex involving less processing, but as the learners' knowledge of the language increases, tasks become more complex. The task is planned, closed and its flow of information is two-way.

Example 3 (Unit 13 p. 45)

The title of Unit 13 is 'Cities and Places'. Its objective is to teach learners how to describe cities and places, make comparisons and read about famous cities. The task follows a grammar section in which learners are introduced to means through which comparisons are made. Before performing the task, learners are required to complete a paragraph using the correct form of adjective. In the task, they are asked to work in pairs comparing pictures using comparative adjectives and comparisons of equality. The task is as follows:
A. Complete the paragraph with the correct form of the given adjectives.

Circuses and funfairs are two places where families go for fun. Circuses are as ______ (interesting) funfairs. Some partners prefer circuses because they are ______ (safe) funfairs.

B. In pairs: Compare the pictures on page 85 at the back of the book. Use comparative adjectives and comparisons of equality.

On page 85 there are pictures of the Red Sea and Pacific Ocean; an old house and a modern house; and a wide road and a narrow street.

Comment

This is a task involving learners in comparing between pictures. It is a focused task as it aims at enhancing the learners’ ability to use comparative adjectives and comparisons of equality. Other than that, it allows for communication with focus primarily on meaning rather than structure. It is a closed, planned, one-way task. There is one correct answer; the task allows learners time to plan for what they will say; and the flow of information needed to complete the task does not depend on the input of the other participant, that is, there is no sharing of information.

3. The Third Year

The design of the syllabus for this year is similar to that of the two previous years. It is based on topics for each unit, and sections for different language skills and components are allocated. The use of tasks aims at developing the communicative ability of the learners which is one of the objectives of the course. However, the kind of topics presented, grammatical structures covered and, consequently, tasks practiced are more difficult compared with the previous intermediate years.

Example 1 (Unit 1 p.3)

The title of Unit 1 is 'Learning Tools'. It aims at teaching learners how to become better in their learning of English, listen to advice on becoming better
listeners, and read about using a dictionary. It starts with a discussion on the contents of the textbook followed by listening activities on the topic of the unit. After that, learners are asked to complete a task in which they take turns asking and answering about ways to improve their English. The task is as follows:

In pairs: Take turns asking and answering about ways to improve your spoken English as well as your handwriting and spelling.

Comment

This is an open, unplanned, two-way task. It has no one correct answer; learners are not given time to prepare for what they will speak about; and the flow of information is two-way for it involves asking and answering. As observed, it is more complex than tasks presented in the previous years as there are opinion-gaps, and personal attitudes expressed. The benefit of this task is two-fold; learners will have the opportunity to practice their language communicatively and will share information and opinions about how to become better language learners.

Example 2 (Unit 3 p. 25)

The title of this unit is 'Making Plans'. It aims at acquainting learners with the ability to talk about plans, make suggestions, accept and refuse suggestions and listen for information about plans. After a grammar section that explains grammatical structures for making suggestions, accepting and refusing them, learners participate in pairs in a task requiring them to take turns making suggestions, accepting two and refusing two. The task is as follows:

In pairs: Take turns to make four suggestions. Accept two, refuse two and give excuses.

Comment

This is a focused task. Although it involves learners in communication, it aims at achieving a particular linguistic outcome (i.e. the correct use of making suggestions, accepting them, refusing them and giving excuses). The kinds of
suggestions that may be given are taken from real-world situations and allow for its application outside the classroom which shows that authenticity is being taken care of in this task. The task serves the purposes of the unit and falls within the range of its topic, and allows for communicative practice in the learning setting.

*Example 3 (Unit 5 p. 44)*

The title of this unit is 'Save Our Planet'. Its objectives are to enhance the communicative abilities of the learners in terms of stating solutions to problems, directing others to do things and so forth. The unit starts with enough listening activities that serve as an input for the type of communicative skills they are expected to show. Certain grammatical structures and lexical items that have to do with the topic of the unit are then explained. After that, learners are expected to practice what has been presented in the unit in a task involving discussion and problem-solving. The task requires learners to discuss, in pairs, the type of pollution they find in their city and direct others to solve this problem. The task is as follows:

A. In pairs: Discuss the type of pollution you find in your city.
B. Direct other students to solve this problem

*Comment*

There is more depth in this activity as it involves learners in thinking about problems existing in their own environment, discussing them and providing solution to them. There exists an opinion-gap in this type of activity in the form of problem-solving. The task is open, unplanned and two-way. Moreover, learners, as explained above, are equipped with the tools required to complete this task correctly: they participated in listening activities that serve as an input for communication; they acquired the kind of lexicon needed for this type of communication; and they dealt with certain grammatical structures that could be made use of in the task. Also, the content of the task and its design are appropriate to the level of proficiency of the participants. This is a result of the suitable sequencing and grading of the tasks throughout the units.
From a personal point of view, the sequencing and gradation of the materials, particularly tasks, throughout the three intermediate years has been taken care of. They have been designed in a way as to fit the proficiency level of the learners and their language progress. As seen, tasks have shifted from controlled tasks in which input is guided, to tasks involving information-gaps and requiring some sort of processing, to more complex tasks involving opinion-gaps and the ability to express one's self and attitudes.

Conclusion

Since the 80s, TBLT has emerged as a method of the communicative language teaching approach. Throughout the past decades it has witnessed development in terms of design and application. Recently, it has become a 'fad' in the field of language teaching and learning. This is evident in the fact that conferences including the most distinguished figures in educational and applied linguistics are held every now and then on this particular method of language teaching.

The literature on TBLT highlights many issues peculiar to the most appropriate application of it in the classroom. The underlying learning theory of TBLT and communicative language teaching suggests that activities in which language is employed to complete meaningful tasks enhances learning. Therefore, researchers in this field have sought to create a mechanism through which tasks applied in the learning context resemble the kind of communication learners will need outside the classroom. This is clear in the fact that pedagogical tasks are derived from real-world tasks through an identification of learners' needs. These tasks are then graded and sequenced in a way that best suits the proficiency-level of the learners. The diversity of task design has also been one of the issues addressed in the area of TBLT. In the literature, a distinction is made between three kinds of task design: open vs. closed; planned vs. unplanned; and one-way vs. two-way tasks. The application of each design will depend on the level of the learners and objectives of the teaching program.
Only a few programs implementing TBLT have been reported. This could be due to the fact that dust has not settled in this area of language teaching and that its application has not come to a complete stabilization. However, many language teaching programs do embed some of the principles of TBLT and make use of the advantages of the inclusion of tasks regardless of the method adopted. An example of this is the teaching of English in Saudi Intermediate schools.

The design of the syllabus of English in Saudi Intermediate schools is based on topics. Tasks are used frequently in each unit to develop the communicative ability of the learners as articulated in the objectives of the courses. What has been observed is that there is some sort of careful sequencing of tasks in terms of difficulty; they gradually move from simplicity to complexity taking into consideration the proficiency level of the learners. Moreover, information-gap activities precede opinion-gap activities as they are less complicated and require less processing and analysis. As to the design of these tasks, it has been found that they are mostly closed and planned. This may be due to the fact that even if learners make progress in their learning of English, open and planned tasks are considered to be beyond their level of proficiency and could be applied in higher levels with more progress witnessed. Although the essence of tasks is that they do not have a restrictive focus and seek no specific linguistic outcome, some applications of tasks in the three years were directed towards developing a particular grammatical structure or certain lexical items discussed in the unit. However, the main tendency is allowing for more practice to promote communicative competence. Not only that, but the content stems from situations found in real-world. Finally, tasks are designed in a way so that they become familiar to the learners. This in turn allows for more motivation and less stress on the part of the learners.

Regardless of all what has been observed about the use of tasks in Saudi intermediate-level English textbooks, very important questions are still pending: 'Are English teachers in Saudi intermediate schools aware of the importance of these tasks?' If so, 'Are they trained enough to apply them appropriately?' Moreover, 'Do time, size and place constraints allow for the targeted appropriate
application of such tasks?" Unless these issues are addressed, tasks in textbooks will remain a dead letter!
References


