

# LET'S GO TO TIM HORTON'S:

## A sample of a task

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The goal of this paper is to discuss the concept of a task as a pedagogical activity used in the second language (L2) classroom for the purpose of developing the communicative competence of L2 learners. The term *task* has been widely used in the field of applied linguistics (see e.g., Bygate, Skehan & Swain, 2001; Lightbown & Spada, 2010; Long, 2014; Nunan, 2004; Willis & Willis, 2007). The Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLBs), a document that represents a Canadian language standard for teaching and assessment of English as a Second Language (ESL) in Canada, lists task-based instruction as one of its guiding principles (Center for Canadian Language Benchmarks (CCLB), 2012, p. IX). In addition, Portfolio-Based Language Assessment (PBLA), a new type of assessment recently introduced in federally and provincially funded ESL classes in Canada, uses the concept of a real-world task (Pettis, 2014). Therefore, TESL students trained to become ESL Instructors or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instructors, as well as practicing ESL/ EFL teachers need to have a clear understanding of what a task is, what the main criteria of a task are and how a task can be used in the ESL/ EFL classroom. This paper attempts to answer these questions by providing and discussing a sample task.

## Why TBLT: The rationale behind the approach

Since the 1980s, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has been known as a leading approach to second language (L2) teaching and learning in the ESL and EFL contexts (see e.g., Harmer & Thornbury, 2013). The goal of this approach is the acquisition of *communicative competence*, which is known as the ability to use language in a variety of communicative contexts taking into account the relationship between speakers (see e.g., Canale & Swain, 1980; Celce-Murcia, 2008; Hymes, 1967, 1972). From the early days of its introduction in the L2 classroom, the ESL/ EFL curricula have been developed based on the main principle of CLT that emphasizes the primacy of *meaning* over language *form*. In other words, the pedagogical goal of CLT is to teach L2 learners how to communicate meaning rather than to focus on the manipulation of language form (e.g., grammar, vocabulary) in isolation (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 196).

Over the years, many applied linguists (see e.g., Spada, 2007) and practicing ESL/ EFL teachers have noticed that as a result of the application of the strong version of CLT in the L2 classroom, L2 learners develop fluency in their L2, where fluency is understood as

the ability of L2 learners to communicate meaning. At the same time, L2 learners develop interlanguage grammars that lack grammatical accuracy. In other words, L2 learners can convey communicative messages; however, they convey them by using phrases and sentences that would not be judged as grammatical by expert speakers of English. In an attempt to overcome this problem, a new method known as the Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has been introduced in the L2 classroom (see e.g., Hummel, 2014, p. 116).

TBLT has been called by some applied linguists the “methodological option” of the CLT (see e.g., Brown & Lee 2015, p. 39). As an approach to language teaching, TBLT targets the learner’s ability to accomplish a task; at the same time, it also assumes that while doing a task, L2 learner’s attention can be drawn to language forms (i.e. sounds, vocabulary and grammar) that are needed for the successful completion of the task. It is hypothesized that L2 learners will *notice* language forms and structures introduced within the communicative context of the task and *noticing* of language forms can lead to language acquisition, as predicted by the Noticing Hypothesis (see e.g., Schmidt, 1983).

The idea behind TBLT as an approach to L2 teaching and learning has been supported by theoretical and empirical evidence. As an approach to L2 teaching and learning, TBLT is based on a theory of language that emphasizes a cognitive-interactionist perspective to language learning. The Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996, 2014) assumes that by doing a task (e.g., a picture description task), L2 learners *negotiate for meaning*, which can take place through *interactional modification* (i.e. through clarification requests, requests for paraphrasing, confirmations, recasts, etc.). Interactionally modified or adjusted input makes L2 language forms and functions more *salient* and therefore available for learning.

In terms of the theory of learning, TBLT is based on the idea that experiential and learner-centered learning is much more effective than more traditional, teacher-centered methods of learning. In addition, a task has the potential to improve problem-solving skills, develop critical thinking and address the multiple intelligences of L2 learners present in the ESL classroom (see e.g., Dewey, 1939/1966; Freire, 1970; Gardner 2011).

## Definition of a task and its criteria

For the purpose of this paper, we follow the definition by Nunan (2004, p. 4), who defines a task as “a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, and producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form.” In addition to the primary goal of a task as a pedagogical activity where learners learn how to interact in the target language, the following criteria of a task have been selected from the literature on TBLT. These criteria can be used by practicing ESL/ EFL instructors as guiding principles to be taken into consideration when designing tasks or selecting tasks from the ready-made materials available in published resources, such as textbooks, or available on-line.

1. The first and the most important criterion that follows from the definition provided by Nunan is that a task should always prioritize communicative meaning over language form. In order for ESL/ EFL instructors to develop or select tasks for L2 learners, they first need to understand what meaning must be communicated to successfully complete the task.
2. In addition to teaching learners how to interact in the target language, a task should focus learners' attention on the forms of the language (i.e. sounds, grammar, and vocabulary) that are necessary for the successful completion of a task. Most importantly, language forms should not be presented in isolation from the communicative context of a task; they should be viewed as linguistic resources that are necessary for the successful completion of a task.
3. The third criterion is the relevance of a task to the needs and interests of L2 learners. It is known that L2 learners represent a very diverse group of students with different needs and different cultural backgrounds, as well as different levels of education and literacy. The relevance of a task for L2 learners is identified through a *needs assessment*. The needs assessment allows ESL/ EFL teachers to select and/or develop the tasks that are relevant and meaningful to their learners.
4. The fourth criterion is that a task should be able to stand alone as a communicative act and it should have a communication problem to solve. This criterion of a task targets the development of problem solving and critical thinking skills.
5. While designing a task, it is necessary to keep in mind that a task should have a clear structure with a beginning, middle and an end.
6. The last criterion deals with the assessment of the performance of L2 learners. The assessment of the task should be outcome-based. The assessment of the performance of the learners on the task should target their ability to do things with language. In other words, ESL/ EFL teachers should assess L2 learners' ability to successfully complete the task.

## Task: A sample

The next part of the paper includes an example of a lesson plan that is focused around a task designed by taking into consideration the six criteria for a task mentioned above. This task is designed for a Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) level-three class offered by one of the settlement agencies located in Toronto. This is a typical multicultural and multilingual LINC classroom, as the LINC students who attend this class have different levels of language proficiency and different levels of secondary and postsecondary education. All the learners are literate in their L1s.

The theme of the lesson plan within which the task is introduced is *Health and Safety* and the topic is *Healthy Eating*.<sup>1</sup> This task targets the development of the two competency

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<sup>1</sup> The learners have been previously introduced to and practiced the theme-related vocabulary (e.g., *fat, sugar, sodium, protein, calcium, daily value*, etc.); they have been introduced to the grammatical concepts of count/non-count nouns, quantifiers, such as *few, less, much, more*). L2 learners have been practicing the use of quantifiers with nouns and comparatives (e.g., *less sugar, more calories, fewer calories*, etc.).

areas in the 2 language skills (i.e. reading & writing).<sup>2</sup> Thus, for a reading skill, the two competency areas are *comprehending information* and *getting things done*. For writing, the two competency areas are *sharing information* and *reproducing information*. It should be noted that before the task was introduced to the learners, they were engaged in the two form-focused activities (FFA), the purpose of which is to prepare the learners for the successful completion of the task. These two FFAs are review activities. Their goal is first, to review previously introduced topic-related vocabulary, and second, to review students' understanding of count and non-count nouns as well as quantifiers that can be used with them.

### Form-focused activity 1<sup>3</sup>

*Count or non-count? For the words below, write C for a count noun and N for a non-count noun*

Sugar, sodium, fat, calories, job, work, snow, rain, rice, time, minutes, hours, money, dollars, bills, change (related to money), coin, mistake, activity, food, gram, milligram, liter, milliliter, students, tea, toast, juice, milk, pound

### Form-focused activity 2:

Now write three sentences with the words. Please use the words ***fewer, less, more***.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

FFA 1 focuses learners' attention on the distinction between count and non-count nouns, whereas FFA 2 focuses their attention on quantifiers and the comparative form of quantifiers, such as *little less* and *few fewer*. The purpose of these two FFA is to prepare L2 learners for the successful completion of the task that is described below.

In the task called *Let's Go to Tim Horton's* (see Attachment 1), the learners are asked to view the information adapted from Tim Horton's nutrition guide (The TDL Group Corp., 2014), arrange breakfast and snack choices in order from less healthy to healthier choices, and choose a healthy breakfast and a healthy snack. In both exercises included in the task, learners have to justify their answers to a friend by producing sentences with quantifiers, such as *less, fewer, more*. The task also includes a self-assessment component based on the *Can-Do Statements* (CCLB, 2013), such as *I can write short, simple sentences about things*

2 A competency area is a concept used in the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLBs) that describes an ability of a L2 learner; specifically, what L2 learners can do with language in a certain skill and at a certain level of his/her development (CCLB, 2012).

3 In Activity 1, Activity 2, and in the task, learners' attention is drawn to the grammatical structures and forms explicitly. The intention is that learners will attend to and notice language forms while they are working on a task. This decision to focus on form explicitly is supported by the positive outcomes of the research on explicit teaching as well as research on form-focus instruction (see e.g., Spada, 1997, 2014).

*I know, I can copy information (e.g. numbers), and I can find information in simple tables.* Students' reflections and teacher's comments constitute an integral part of the assessment.

The task is designed based on the criteria for the task mentioned above. First, the task is designed for the purpose of communicating meaning (i.e. making healthy choices) rather than for the manipulation of isolated language forms. Second, this task is authentic, as it has been adapted from the brochure that contains the information about the nutritional value of the products offered at Tim Horton's, a popular coffee shop in Canada. Third, the task includes language forms, such as topic-related vocabulary and quantifiers and promotes noticing of these language forms by the learners. Among the topic-related vocabulary, there are specific food items that the learners may not be familiar with, such as *English muffins*, *Timbits*, *latté*, as they may not be used in their home countries. On the other hand, these vocabulary items are frequently used by Canadians. Knowledge of these vocabulary items selected for the task also provides the learners with an opportunity to learn about Canadian culture, as going to Tim Horton's and ordering from Tim Horton's constitutes a big part of the Canadian identity. The task of ordering a beverage or a pastry from Tim Horton's is something that the learners might do on a regular basis in Canada. The learners are also provided with opportunities to produce the target forms in a communicative context. Fourth, the task integrates the two language skills, reading and writing, and it also targets the development of one of the competency areas (i.e. *getting things done*) that target the ability of the learners to get information from simple formatted texts (such as forms, tables, and charts; CCLB, 2012, p. 81). Fifth, the task has a clear structure. Sixth, it also includes an assessment component that consists of self-assessment, student's reflection on their performance of the task and the teacher's comment. Therefore, it can be potentially used as an artefact to be included in the learners' portfolio and be part of the learners' ongoing and formative assessment known as PBLA.

## Conclusion

It is our belief that the criteria for a task presented in this paper can be used by ESL/EFL teachers as a guideline (a) when selecting ready-made tasks from published resources, and (b) when developing their own tasks which meet the communicative needs of their L2 learners.

## Attachment 1

## Let's Go to Tim Horton's: The task

1. You want to have breakfast at Tim Horton's. Choose a healthy breakfast and explain why this breakfast is healthy. In your answer, use the words *less*, *fewer*, *more*. Now arrange breakfast sandwiches from less healthy to more healthy.

| Breakfast sandwiches                              | Serving size (g) | Calories | Fat | Sodium (mg) | Sugar (g) | Protein (g) | Calcium (% daily value) |
|---|------------------|----------|-----|-------------|-----------|-------------|-------------------------|
| English muffin, sausage, egg, cheese              | 164              | 410      | 24  | 850         | 1         | 19          | 20                      |
| English muffin, turkey sausage, egg white, cheese | 164              | 280      | 9   | 780         | 2         | 20          | 15                      |
| English muffin, egg white, cheese                 | 127              | 220      | 5   | 500         | 2         | 13          | 15                      |
| Oatmeal   | 327              | 210      | 3   | 220         | 14        | 6           | 4                       |

2. You want to have a snack (a coffee and a pastry) at Tim Horton's. Choose a healthy snack and explain why. In your answer, use the words *less*, *fewer*, *more*. Now arrange the snacks from less healthy to more healthy. Number your choices.

| <b>Donuts</b>          | Serving size (g)  | Calories | Fat | Sodium (mg) | Sugar (g) | Protein (g) | Calcium (% daily value) |
|------------------------|-------------------|----------|-----|-------------|-----------|-------------|-------------------------|
| Toasted Coconut        | 79                | 290      | 13  | 280         | 22        | 4           | 4                       |
| Toasted Coconut Timbit | 20                | 70       | 3.5 | 75          | 6         | 1           | 0                       |
| Blueberry Muffin       | 115               | 340      | 11  | 430         | 25        | 5           | 2                       |
| <b>Beverage</b>        | Serving size (mL) | Calories | Fat | Sodium (mg) | Sugar (g) | Protein (g) | Calcium (% daily value) |
| Black coffee           | 286               | 0        | 0   | 0           | 0         | 0           | 0                       |
| Hot chocolate          | 285               | 240      | 6   | 320         | 38        | 2           | 2                       |
| Latte                  | 286               | 80       | 0.2 | 120         | 11        | 8           | 25                      |

**Self-assessment based on *Can Do* statements (CCLB, 2013):**

|   |     |                             |
|---|-----|-----------------------------|
| 1. I can write short, simple sentences about things I know. | Yes | <i>I need more practice</i> |
| 2. I can write common, everyday words.                      |     |                             |
| 3. I can copy information (e.g. numbers)<br>4.              |     |                             |
| 5. I can find information in simple tables                  |     |                             |

**Student's reflection:****Teacher's comments:**

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