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# 8A

## Designing Pedagogic Tasks for Refugees Learning English to Enter Universities in the Netherlands

Seyit Ömer Gök and Marije Michel

### 8A.1 Introduction

Global political, economic and environmental crises have caused people to flee their home countries in search of a safe land where they can live, work and raise their children. Consequently, many countries across the world have granted protection for refugees, often on the condition that they will return home at some point. This has, however, resulted in the growth of ‘involuntary’ (Long, 2015: 3) language learners at all ages. It is widely acknowledged, however, that ‘the knowledge of the ‘host’ language is seen as a barometer of migrants’ integration in a particular society’ (Ros i Sole, 2014: 57). As Long (2005: 1) puts it: ‘successful language learning is vital for refugees’ and acquiring the national language has become one of the most fundamental elements of the European Union’s integration policy (Ros i Sole, 2014).

In some cases, however, prioritising high levels of English over the national language could be more beneficial, especially for educated refugees. Improving their English might not only be more achievable and shorten the duration of their integration process, but also potentially enables them to start participating in the host society, as English gives them access to higher education, as well as the job market. For instance, in the Netherlands – the context of the current case study – virtually all university programmes require high levels of English (at least B2 according

We thank all learners and teachers of the English Academy for Newcomers for their participation and cooperation. In particular, we would like to name Kinan Alajak for his support and dedication to this project. Our thanks also go to Tu ba Gök for her creative and critical contributions to task design.

to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, CEFR) and several BA and most MA programmes are taught entirely in English (VSNU, 2012). Consequently, educated refugees with some level of English-language knowledge could be substantially supported by English for academic purposes (EAP) courses, so that they can be admitted to higher education programmes. Yet, refugees' pre- and post-migration factors are known to distinguish them significantly from other groups of learners (e.g., Čatibušić, Gallagher & Karazi, 2019; Toker & Sağdıç, this volume), such that existing EAP programmes geared towards 'regular' international students often fail to address the needs of refugee students. This case study illustrates a task-based EAP programme that was designed for, and implemented at, an NGO of volunteers teaching English to refugees in the Netherlands.

## 8A.2 Context

The context of this case study is an NGO offering English-language courses for refugees who wish to pursue their studies in Dutch higher education or take the next step in their professional career. The English-language learning programme, which runs on a trimester basis, follows a modular system based on the CEFR and currently offers three entry levels: A2, B1 and B2. In each three-month trimester period, students are expected to attend forty-eight hours of face-to-face classes (four hours per week) and complete up to one hundred hours of self-study, including the weekly assignments. The ultimate goal of the programme is to help students attain the required score in the IELTS exam that gives them access to higher education; for example, 6.0 overall for most BA programmes. The curriculum has predominantly been designed to achieve this objective, and both in-class and self-study materials have been selected and developed accordingly. The syllabus follows a mainly synthetic focus on forms approach as it draws on the coursebooks selected for each level.

Recently, Middleton (2019) performed a small-scale needs analysis (NA) within the same organisation as part of his MA thesis supervised by the second author of this chapter. The NA identified a variety of additional needs for this specific group of refugee learners. In this chapter, we will present a series of one-hour lessons following a task-based approach (Bygate, Samuda & Van den Branden, this volume; Skehan, this volume) that complement each module in the existing curriculum addressing the identified needs. It should be noted, however, that the topics and language focus of the task-based strand follow the central syllabus described above. As such, students work with a 'hybrid syllabus' in which two different types are employed simultaneously (Long, 2015). To provide further context for this case study, the following section summarises Middleton's (2019) NA.

### 8A.3 Needs Analysis

Teaching English for No Obvious Reason (TENOR) is not very effective, as it often results in irrelevant content, low learner motivation and little awareness of what has been acquired or the inability to use the language in a functional and purposeful way (Lambert, 2010). A systematic NA should therefore be the departure point for any curriculum development, course design and/or materials development project to be effective and accountable (Jordan, 1997; Long, 2005). Nevertheless, few studies report on the NA conducted with educated refugee language learners, even though those learners are quite a distinctive group in several ways (Toker & Sağdıç, this volume). Different pre- and post-migration factors are likely to influence the language acquisition process of refugees. Pre-migration factors, such as level and progress of formal education and health and mental state, including trauma, can impact refugees' learning trajectories in the host country (Chiswick & Miller, 2001). Typically, newcomers with a higher educational background tend to have more developed learning strategies and metalinguistic skills, as well as higher motivation than regular learners (Middleton, 2019; VluchtelingenWerk, 2018). As post-migration factors, Van Tubergen (2010) identifies the level of personal investment (e.g., a refugee's commitment to stay in the host country) and the resources available to the learner. That is, if relevant resources are available, this potentially increases a refugee's desire to invest in language training to find better job opportunities.

For his NA, Middleton (2019) administered a survey and semi-structured interviews with both learners ( $n = 16$ ) and teachers ( $n = 4$ ) of the NGO the current case study describes. Findings revealed that the most important perceived needs were to improve: (1) English test score results (IELTS); (2) work/study vocabulary; (3) writing; and (4) listening. The specific areas in which learners identified their needs were:

1. Speaking: Taking part in classroom activities and meetings
2. Listening: Conversations with teachers/instructors or colleagues
3. Listening: Understanding teacher instructions in class
4. Writing academic texts: reports/reviews/articles
5. Writing: Formal letters/emails.

Notably, many student respondents criticised the coursebooks, as they found the topics irrelevant, boring and lacking real-life application. To quote one of the students: 'Why should I learn about Scotland? Give me something that I can use in my life.' (Middleton, 2019: 22). Also the (volunteer) teachers asked for adjustments to the material and curriculum. Specifically, they experienced a lack of structure in the programme as a whole and longed for clear objectives for individual courses, including the timeframe allowed to cover the content of the coursebooks.

All these comments suggested a compelling need for a customised curriculum, as well as the development of a series of pedagogic and real-life tasks based on the needs of the learners in this context. In general, the data support recent calls for local (instead of global) materials because these potentially meet the needs, interests and wants of specific audiences (Gök, 2019; Harwood, 2010; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2017). For commercial purposes, publishers tend to address as wide an audience as possible, which means that 'it is rare to find a perfect fit between learner needs and course requirements, on the one hand, and what the coursebook contains, on the other hand' (Cunningsworth, 1995: 136).

For the case study at hand, the task types, topics, and sequencing were primarily determined according to Middleton's (2019) findings. The authors' experiences in (Dutch) higher education and the situations in which learners were most likely to use English in the future were also taken into account. The following sections provide details about the process of task development and implementation.

## 8A.4 Task Design and Methodology

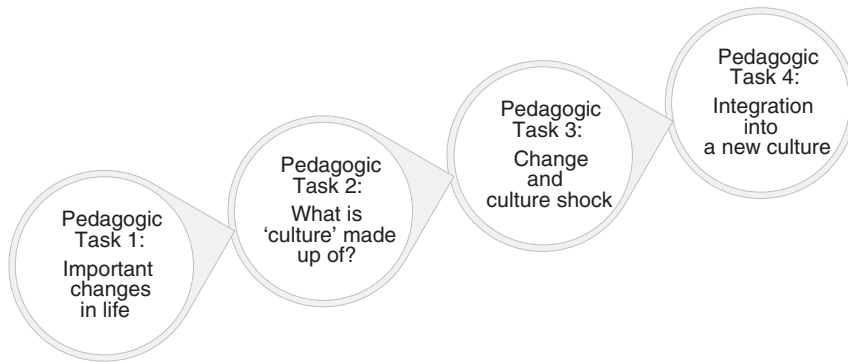
From the various definitions of 'task' available in the literature (cf. Sasayama, this volume) we use the one by Bygate, Skehan and Swain (2001: 11): 'A task is an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective.' While creating our task-based syllabus, we followed Ellis (2009) when deciding on task design and methodology. That is, we discussed until agreement was reached about the content (i.e., the 'what'), as well as the structure, of a lesson and procedures (i.e., the 'how') of teaching.

As an illustration, Table 8A.1 shows two task cycles, each of which consists of three pedagogic tasks followed by a final real-life task, which were created for the A2, B1 and B2 modules, respectively. The pedagogic tasks build on the target tasks identified by the NA and are graded according to their intrinsic complexity, as well as their themes. Each of the cycles was then planned to cover four weeks – one task per week.

The aim of the pedagogic tasks is to gradually lay the groundwork for the real-life target task at the end of a cycle. For this purpose, target tasks were first broken down into thematically linked sub-tasks before we sequenced those pedagogic tasks. The 'rational sequencing of pedagogic tasks' (Long, 2015: 227), followed criteria of frequency, criticality, learnability, complexity and difficulty. Scholars agree that task sequencing remains problematic, given that intuitions about task complexity and difficulty differ from person to person (Widdowson, 1990). The field has called for more objective measures (Révész, 2014), yet, recent empirical work suggests that subjective ratings of perceived task complexity are a suitable way to establish relative difficulty (Révész, Michel & Gilabert, 2016). Therefore,

Table 8A.1 Task design

CEFR	Cycle 1				Cycle 2			
	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4
	Pedagogic Task 1	Pedagogic Task 2	Pedagogic Task 3	Real-life/target Task	Pedagogic Task 1	Pedagogic Task 2	Pedagogic Task 3	Real-life/target Task
A2	Why do you want/need to learn English?	How to become a good language learner	Setting short-term and long-term goals	Setting realistic future goals	Finding the university library and other facilities on the campus map	Comparing university libraries	Inside a university library	Booking a study room in the university library
B1	Making excuses and giving reasons	Asking for a deadline extension orally	Asking for a deadline extension via email	Filling out a deadline extension form	Important changes in life	What is 'culture' made up of?	Change and culture shock	Integration into a new culture
B2	Understanding the levels of CEFR and how they work	Exploring the modes of instruction delivery in Dutch higher education	Choosing courses from the university programme for refugee students	Writing a motivation letter to attend a course of the university refugee programme	Understanding 'volunteering'?	Applying for a job (the steps)	Writing a cover letter for a job position	Applying for a job and preparing for a job interview



**Figure 8A.1** Task topics and sequence

we trusted our informed, but subjective, assessment when sequencing the tasks. Accordingly, we sequenced themes, from general to specific and from known to unknown, and we ensured that each pedagogic task within a cycle added cognitive load and/or performative stress (e.g., time pressure) to the former activities to progressively reach target task performance (Baralt, Gilabert & Robinson, 2014; Gilabert & Malicka, this volume; Long, 2015).

Figure 8A. 1 illustrates one of the task cycles with thematically linked pedagogic tasks developed for the B1 module that focuses on 'integration'.

## 8A.5 Example Task Cycle

Each pedagogic and real-life task was divided into a pre-task, (main) task and post-task stage (Ellis, 2009; Willis & Willis, 2001), which in turn consisted of several activities. Typically, during the pre-task stage, the topic of the lesson was introduced to activate learners' schemata and their prior knowledge and experience. Often, this stage consisted of relevant YouTube videos to attract learners' attention, make the content more appealing, and expose them to authentic language (vocabulary, phrases and grammatical structures), in order to increase learners' readiness for the main task. Following the fundamental principles of task-based language teaching (Willis & Willis, 2001), at all times students were given the flexibility to use any linguistic feature they might want during task completion. Figure 8A.2 illustrates the activities of the pre-task stage for a real-life task at B2 level.

The specific refugee programme gives newcomers with an academic background and appropriate levels of English the opportunity to attend undergraduate or postgraduate courses without having to pay any fees. The main aim of the programme is to help newcomers continue their education and integrate into society rather than waiting 'on hold' at

1. Ask students whether they are aware of the specific refugee programme at their university.
2. Tell students that you are going to play a video introducing this programme [www.youtube.com/watch?v=tkGXyqoZUQY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tkGXyqoZUQY).
3. Ask them to find answers for the questions below and discuss the answers in pairs after watching the video:
  - a. What is the rationale for the programme?
  - b. How was the idea first conceived?
  - c. What are the steps in the intake procedure?
4. Ask students whether they would like to join the programme. Why/Why not?

**Figure 8A.2** Pre-task activities for real-life task (B2)

refugee centres or in their new homes. The students in this study were all potential applicants for those courses. Therefore, we included this as a central topic of one of the task-based lessons.

Following the pre-task stage, students were engaged in a series of tasks that needed to be completed either individually, in pairs or small groups during the main-task stage. The focus was on task completion and outcome rather than linguistic accuracy; however, teachers were encouraged to monitor and scaffold learners' performance whenever linguistic needs emerged, using the principle of 'leading from behind' (Gibbons, 1998), that is, providing support to students, as they are engaged in tasks, without interrupting task performance. Figure 8A.3, an example of the main-task stage, lets students rehearse the actual application procedures for the refugee programme using authentic materials.

Main tasks are designed to be integrative, that is, they are both 'input-providing' and 'output prompting' (Ellis, 2009: 224), as they involve two or more of the receptive (reading and listening) and productive (speaking and writing) skills. We aimed for input material to be authentic, for example, directly taken from relevant websites and used without any adaptation. We incorporated the input material into activities in such a way that learners would perceive them as meaningful because they were essential for successful task completion (Long, 2015).

During the post-task stage (see Figure 8A.4), students were actively encouraged to 'notice' (Schmidt, 1990; i.e., consciously recognise) the language that they and their partners had been using during task completion. In addition, teachers asked them to reflect on their overall performance. At this stage, teachers were invited to focus on form, as they could highlight useful language and provide alternatives for incorrect language that had emerged during task performance.

Finally, students were given a homework assignment that would elaborate their in-class experience.



1. Give students the information from the webpage about the refugee programme: [www.uu.nl/en/education/inclusion/apply-for-inclusion-courses-as-refugee](http://www.uu.nl/en/education/inclusion/apply-for-inclusion-courses-as-refugee). Ask them to read it and find out whether they are eligible to apply for a course. Why/Why not?
2. Explain to students that from the list of the courses offered as part of the refugee programme, they are asked to find two/three courses that they are interested in.
3. In pairs, each student tells their partner what courses he/she would like to take and why. The partner then gives advice about what course would be the better option – again providing justification for the advice.
4. Once students have settled on the course they would like to study, give *Handout 8* and tell them to complete the course application/registration form.

**Figure 8A.3** Main-task activities for real-life task (B2)

1. Tell students to swap their application/registration forms and comment on their partners' responses.
2. Explain any useful/incorrect language you, as a teacher, have noticed during the task-completion process.
3. Ask students to talk with their partners to discuss the questions about the lesson below.
  - a. What did I learn?
  - b. What is important about what we did today?
  - c. How can I apply what we did in real life?
  - d. Are there patterns of language I recognise?
  - e. How well did I do? How can I improve?
4. Homework: Tell students to find similar courses for newcomers online and ask them to share the information with the class during the next lesson.

**Figure 8A.4** Post-task activities for real-life task (B2)

### 8A5.1 Implementation

Teaching a task-based syllabus might be perceived as more challenging than following a traditional textbook approach, because spontaneous classroom interaction and providing emergent focus on form can be daunting (Long, 2015). In particular, novice teachers could be in need of support when implementing a task-based approach (cf. East, this volume). This was also true for the context of the study presented here, as our cohort of teachers consists of volunteers within the NGO supporting refugees. Many of them had only limited teacher training and even our experienced teachers were relatively unfamiliar with task-based language teaching. At the beginning of the 2019–20 academic year, we delivered a series of training sessions on task-based language teaching prior to the actual implementation of the task syllabus. The training focused on its origin and principles, the definition of

'task' (in particular how it differs from an exercise), and after modelling sample task implementations, teachers were asked to design their own task cycles with the aim of guiding students towards successful target task performance.

In addition, teachers received a step-by-step teacher guide for each task-based lesson detailing all teacher and student actions, as well as providing handouts and links to the complete set of materials with clear instructions. Still, as task developers we were aware of the gap between 'task-as-workplan' and 'task-in-process' (Breen, 1987), which acknowledges that tasks on paper cannot and should not determine what will actually happen when they are used inside the classroom. Hence, both the learners' reinterpretation of the tasks in use and adaptations to the tasks by teachers were expected to lead to changes during classroom implementation (Duff, 1993). Accordingly, teachers were informed that they should not feel obliged to follow the instructions to the letter, but instead had the flexibility to make any necessary adjustments to better meet their students' needs and interests.

Finally, as we worked with a hybrid syllabus, to date, the task-based lessons have not become part of the regular formal assessment practices of the curriculum. Formative assessment and evaluation are embedded in the post-task stage, during which learners were encouraged to engage in self-and/or peer-assessment supported by teacher feedback (cf. Norris & East, this volume). One major aim of this approach was to raise students' consciousness towards their linguistic as well as task performance and guide them towards autonomy, taking charge of their own language learning (Benson, 2013).

### **8A5.2 Evaluation**

With regard to the evaluation of the task-based lessons, feedback and support channels between the teachers and task designers were kept open before, during, and after the implementation process to ensure mutual understanding and to maximise the effectiveness of the task-based approach. Additionally, a feedback form solicited information about teachers' experiences after executing each task in their classroom, asking the following questions:

1. Do you think the content/topic of the task was relevant to your students' needs, interests and wants? Why/why not?
2. Do you think the language level of the task was appropriate for your students? If not, please give specific examples from your lesson.
3. Can you please evaluate the difficulty of the task from your students' perspective?
4. How was student participation during the task implementation?

5. What were the challenges you faced during the task implementation, if any?
6. What part(s) do you think need to be revised to make them more effective?

At present, we have not received sufficient feedback to systematically evaluate the classroom implementation. As mentioned before, the task-based lessons only covered one hour of the four hours of face-to-face weekly contact teachers had with students. They admitted that it was challenging to implement the tasks on top of the weekly coursework prescribed by the base syllabus. Moreover, many students were not used to tasks requiring group interaction, problem-solving and productivity in both writing and speaking, so the task-based activities required additional time and support and teachers chose to omit or minimise parts of the task-based lessons or assigned them as homework. As lead educators of the NGO, we are currently debating how to react to these experiences, pondering the options: (i) revise and shorten the task-based activities so they fit within the one hour; (ii) increase the number of face-to-face classes to six hours a week to open up more space for task-based lessons; (iii) abandon part of the base syllabus. This last option might result in new challenges, because the students' priority is their short-term goal, that is, to enter university, and therefore deem IELTS preparation more relevant than the task-based activities.

In future, we aim to provide not only the teachers but also the learners with training about task-based instruction to highlight how they will benefit from these activities in the long run. Before doing so, it seems necessary, however, to conduct a more systematic in-use and post-use evaluation of the task-based lessons, triangulating multiple data sources (e.g., questionnaires, interviews) to further calibrate and improve the task cycles in our programme.

## 8A.6 Conclusion

This case study explored the design and development of a series of tasks targeting a group of educated refugees learning English and their volunteer teachers at an NGO in the Netherlands. It showcases an original context that has received little attention in the literature to date: refugees learning English as a *foreign* language for academic and professional purposes. We have shown how to incorporate a task-based syllabus based on a systematic NA in an existing language programme that is geared towards learners' short-term goal to pass the IELTS test. We present a hybrid syllabus that addressed both students' IELTS goal, as well as their immediate needs and interests as identified by the NA.

Specifically, we drew on the findings of a small-scale NA within the same context performed by Middleton (2019), that informed us about the

refugee learners' perceived needs in speaking, listening, and writing in academic contexts. Following a task-based language teaching approach (Bygate, Samuda, & van den Branden, this volume; Skehan, this volume), we developed a series of task-based lessons targeting these needs at the CEFR levels A2, B1 and B2, for which the NGO offered classes to refugees. One task cycle covers four one-hour lessons, to be taught across four weeks, and consists of three pedagogic tasks plus one real-life (target) task that are thematically related and sequenced according to principles of task complexity. Each task-based lesson involves the three stages of pre-task, (main) task and post-task. Learners and teachers were provided with all materials, and step-by-step guidance for each lesson was available for teachers, even though they were free to adapt the teaching according to their students' needs.

The informal evaluation of this initial implementation of our task-based activities reveals that we need to pay more attention to the in-use and post-use stages of the task-based lessons. In particular, the timing and the priority that learners and teachers currently (can) give to the task-based activities within the hybrid syllabus need to be reconsidered. We wish to provide more training and clearer instructions for both teachers and learners to enhance their adoption of the task-based approach. In addition, we aim to perform classroom observations and interviews to gain more insights into the effectiveness of the tasks and their classroom implementation. This would allow us to fine-tune the tasks such that they meet the learners' needs and interests more accurately. It might also enable us to identify further needs and continue developing other task cycles for the target group of our study: educated refugee learners of English in the Netherlands.

## Further Reading

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## Study Questions

1. In what ways are educated refugee language learners different from other learners?
2. What could be the benefits of developing a task-based syllabus to meet the needs of this specific group of learners?
3. What changes would you make to the example task cycles and tasks presented in this chapter? Explain why.
4. How would you evaluate the effectiveness of the task-based lessons? What could be the advantages of such an evaluation?

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