TEACHING TIP

TASK DESIGN FOR SECOND LANGUAGE SPANISH FLUENCY DEVELOPMENT

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This teaching tip offers a guide for task design aimed at promoting fluency development in intermediate-level second language (L2) Spanish. Tasks—defined as language-teaching activities during which learners negotiate for meaning to achieve a nonlinguistic outcome (e.g., Ellis, 2009)—have been shown to encourage development of L2 grammar and lexis. Recently, scholars have investigated the role of tasks in promoting L2 pronunciation development (see Gurzynski-Weiss, Long, & Solon's [2017] special issue), and this growing body of work has focused on segmental and suprasegmental aspects of L2s. To demonstrate task design for fluency development, we present and explain in detail our task that incorporates stories presented in videos and encourages meaningful practice for intermediate-level classroom learners of Spanish. Our detailed description of the task and its objectives are followed by an evaluation of how it meets the criteria for a task (Ellis, 2009) and suggestions for implementation and manipulation. From this teaching tip, the reader will learn how to design a task to promote fluency in a L2.

INTRODUCTION

This teaching tip outlines the design and implementation of a task aimed to facilitate development of second language (L2) Spanish fluency at the intermediate level. We begin by defining task and offering a brief overview of the theoretical rationale underlying tasks from the perspective of task-based language learning and teaching. We then describe our task, offering a detailed overview of each component of the task as well as guidelines for implementation and manipulation. In addition to the description detailed here, the task can be found at Indiana University's task-based language teaching website (http://tblt.indiana.edu/tasks.html).

What is a task?

A task is the central unit for language-based lesson and program design within a task-based approach to second language teaching. There are several approaches to how tasks may facilitate language development (e.g., Ellis, 2003; Long, 1985; Skehan, 1998); however, each approach shares a focus on authentic language use as well as a focus on form to draw learners' attention to language during communication (Ellis, 2009).

Each task-based approach to language teaching has its own definition of a task that may differ (to a greater or lesser extent) from other approaches. Across the variety of definitions that exist, Ellis (2009) proposed that, for a language activity to be considered a task, it must have the four characteristics outlined in Table 1.

Table 1

Task components (Ellis, 2009)

Task component	Description
Primary focus on meaning	A task has a central focus on communication in the target language.
Negotiation of meaning	Learners interact in the target language to achieve a communicative outcome. Negotiation of meaning may occur through clarification requests, confirmation checks, comprehension checks, etc.
Learners must use their own linguistic and nonlinguistic resources	Learners use their own knowledge of the target language, as well as gestures and their general knowledge of the world, during interaction.
Communicative outcome	The specific goal of the task is a non-linguistic, communicative outcome (e.g., deciding on a restaurant, determining who the thief is, etc.).

Following Ellis's (2009) guidelines, a contextualized fill-in-the-blank exercise in Spanish that requires learners to provide the correct form of *ser* or *estar* would not be considered a task. Writing an ad in which learners describe their ideal roommate, on the other hand, would be considered a task. The task described in this teaching tip adopts Ellis's (2009) criteria for task design.

With respect to task design, tasks are also characterized by whether or not a specific linguistic structure is targeted. Focused tasks are designed to orient learners' attention to a specific linguistic structure, and attention to and/or production of this structure is required in order to complete the task. The focused task in Solon, Long, and Gurzynski-Weiss (2017) required learners to attend to vowels to complete a Spanish language map task by including minimal pair street names (e.g., *Calle Pico*, *Calle Peco*). Unfocused tasks, on the other hand, do not target a specific linguistic structure. For example, Gilabert's (2007) decision-making task, for which learners had to make a series of decisions as fire chief to save individuals from a burning building, was not designed to elicit a specific linguistic structure. The task described in this teaching tip is an unfocused task; it was not designed to elicit a specific linguistic structure from learners during task completion.

Tasks are also characterized by whether they are designed to provide input or prompt output. As these labels suggest, tasks can be designed to provide receptive exposure to the target language (typically by means of listening or reading) or to encourage learners to produce language (by means of speaking, writing, or integration of a receptive and productive skill). The task described in this teaching tip was designed to prompt output.

Finally, tasks may also be designed to be repeated, that is, repeating a specific task multiple times (cf. procedural repetition; e.g., Kim & Tracy-Ventura, 2013). Research on task repetition has shown that repeating a task has positive effects on interaction (Ellis, 2003) and leads to more effective communication (e.g., Yule, Powers, & McDonald, 1992). Task repetition has also been shown to improve fluency in the target language (e.g., Bygate, 1996). The task described in this teaching tip was designed to be repeated in order to promote improved fluency in Spanish as a L2.

What can tasks do for second language pronunciation?

While tasks have been known to promote second language development of vocabulary, grammar, and pragmatics, the potential benefits of tasks for L2 pronunciation development reflects a fairly recent empirical area (see Gurzynski-Weiss et al. 2017, special issue on the benefits of tasks for L2 pronunciation). Tasks have been shown to be (at least partially) beneficial for L2 development of segmental phenomena (e.g., Solon et al., 2017) and suprasegmental phenomena (e.g., Jung, Kim, & Murphy, 2017; McKinnon, 2017; Parlak & Ziegler, 2017). Tasks have also been shown to direct learners' attention to L2 pronunciation by encouraging explicit discussion of pronunciation during task completion (e.g., Solon et al., 2017; Loewen & Isbell, 2017).

Of direct relevance to this teaching tip, tasks have been shown to facilitate fluency development by means of task repetition (e.g., Bygate, 1996). A study by Lambert, Kormos, and Minn (2017) demonstrated that, regardless of learner level and the type of task being repeated (e.g., narration, opinion), learners showed gains in oral fluency as a result of repeating a task. Fluency is tied to other pronunciation-related constructs such as comprehensibility. While comprehensibility is a multilayered construct, research has shown that speech rate (one way in which fluency has been operationalized in L2 production research), amongst other aspects of L2 speech (e.g., vocabulary and prosody), influence comprehensibility ratings for beginning and intermediate-level learners (Saito, Trofimovich, & Isaacs, 2016). Further, fluency has been shown to negatively impact comprehensibility of Spanish spoken by native English-speaking learners (McBride, 2015), who represent the target learners of this teaching tip. Taken together, it stands to reason that task repetition (which is a feature of task design) may facilitate fluency in a L2, which in turn may lead to improved comprehensibility in the L2. This teaching tip outlines basic elements of task design (that includes task repetition) to target L2 fluency development.

THE TASK: *EL ROBO DEL DIAMANTE* 'THE DIAMOND ROBBERY'

Overview

The task featured in this teaching tip was designed for learners of Spanish in their second or third year of college-level courses. This two-way information-gap task requires learners to work in pairs, and the goal of the task is to piece together the main events and details surrounding the mysterious disappearance of a scientist. Although the *communicative outcome* is the collaborative retelling of the story, the *intended aim* of the task is to encourage improvement in fluency.

The story is presented in two different videos: *Origen del diamante* (see Figure 1) and *Reporte: La desaparición de César Cabral* (see Figure 2). These videos were created with the free animation software [Powtoon](#) and scripted and voiced over by the authors of this teaching tip. Students in each

pair are assigned to watch one of the videos at home. Students also have the option to individually watch their assigned videos again before doing the task by using their own technological devices. Hence, student A watches the video *Origen del diamante* and Student B watches *Reporte: La desaparición de César Cabral*. For the task, Student A and Student B are instructed to determine the main events of the story and reach a decision about what happened to the main character, César Cabral, and the diamond he created. After students in pairs reach a decision, they are instructed to watch their assigned videos again and repeat the task of determining the main events of the story and of deciding what happened to César Cabral and his diamond.

Figure 1. Screenshot of Origen del diamante.

Figure 2. Screenshot of *Reporte:* La desaparición de César Cabral.

The story presents César Cabral, a scientist from Madrid, Spain, who managed to transform carbon into a diamond at his laboratory in Argentina. The main reason why he worked so hard toward this goal was to please his mother, who always dreamt of owning this kind of jewel but could never afford one. Over several months, César spent many days and nights in the laboratory he shared with two other scientists, Florencia and Hermenegilda, working on his project to the point that his obsession turned into an issue and Florencia decided to take a trip to Ecuador in order to spend time away from the laboratory. The story also reveals that César described his project to some of

his acquaintances (e.g., his gym coach, his barber, etc.), after which he begins receiving anonymous threats. His suspicion of everyone motivates his decision to flee, and he leaves a recorded confession (*Origen del diamante*) and a diamond behind. The mystery is where César is and who is threatening him.

Is *El Robo del Diamante* a task?

Recall that a task minimally includes the design components outlined in Table 1. In this section, we address how each of the task components are addressed in our task.

The first component of a task is that there is a focus on meaning. Our task meets these criteria by requiring learners to attend to communication (as opposed to metalinguistic aspects of the L2) during task completion. Additionally, to incorporate authentic linguistic variation in the materials, the *Origen del diamante* video was recorded by one of the authors who is from Spain whereas the *Reporte: La desaparición de César Cabral* video includes the voice of one of the other authors who is from Argentina. The second component of a task is that learners are required to negotiate for meaning. Our task meets this criteria by including a gap in information. The information gap of this task lies in the fact that each video contains some information that the other video does not. Our task also meets the negotiation-for-meaning criteria in that the perspective is different for Student A and Student B: Student A (*Origen del diamante*) watches a first person narrative by the main character of the story whereas Student B (*Reporte: La desaparición de César Cabral*) watches a third person narrative by a TV news reporter.

The third component of a task is that learners must use their own linguistic and non-linguistic resources. In our task, Students A and B need to use their own resources to communicate the events and to discover the missing information during interaction. To illustrate, in the video *Origen del diamante*, César Cabral wonders if his coworker Florencia took a break because of his intense work at the laboratory, but he is not aware that she is back in town, a fact which is explicitly presented in *Reporte: La desaparición de César Cabral*. Student A and B must use their knowledge of the L2 to communicate in the language, as well as general cognitive processes (e.g., selection, classification, reasoning, evaluation, etc.; see Ellis, 2003) to complete the task. As suggested by Ellis, processes such as selection, classification, etc. influence the selection of language without determining it. These processes also limit the range of linguistic forms that a user will need to complete the task.

Last, a task must have a nonlinguistic, communicative outcome. At no time during our task are students instructed to use specific forms; they are simply instructed to determine the main events of the story and reach a decision about what happened to César Cabral (the main character of the story) and his diamond. Table 2 offers a concise summary of how our task meets the criteria for task design.

Table 2

Task components in teaching tip task

Task Component	Description	Teacher Tip Task Component
Primary focus on meaning	A task has a central focus on communication. Although the task can also be focused on form, the emphasis on meaning suggests that communication is a central factor.	Student A and Student B narrate to each other the events they recall from *Origen del diamante* and *La desaparición de César Cabral*, respectively.
Negotiation of meaning	Learners interact and negotiate meaning to complete the task. Negotiation of meaning can occur for example through clarification requests, confirmation checks, comprehension checks, etc.	Both students collaboratively reconstruct the story of *El robo del diamante* using distinct information from their assigned videos.
Learners must use their own linguistic and nonlinguistic resources	Tasks suggest that learners can use their own resources to communicate meaning. An example of linguistic resources includes the use of a particular form. Other example of nonlinguistic resources includes gestures learners might use in the interaction.	Students use their own knowledge of the language (e.g., forms such as the simple present, present progressive, preterite/imperfect, etc. and vocabulary related to professions, locations and materials) to describe what César and other story characters or the news reporter said and did. Students use general resources such as reasoning and evaluation to complete the task.
Communicative outcome	Tasks have specific goals, related to communication, which indicate that learners have completed the task successfully.	Both students come to an agreement on what happened, as well as the whereabouts of César Cabral and his diamond.

Recall that a task may further be designed as a focused or unfocused task, as well as an input-providing or output-prompting task. Our task was designed as an unfocused task, as no specific linguistic structure(s) of the L2 are required to complete the task. The task could be manipulated to target a specific pronunciation feature. For example, the names of the story's characters could

be altered to encourage attention to vowels (e.g., Roberto for the main character, Roberta for his lab assistant, etc.), which are important for pronunciation in L2 Spanish. Our task was also designed as an output-prompting task, given that the purpose of interaction is to encourage production in the L2. Again, the task could be manipulated to provide input in the L2. For instance, if students were learning new vocabulary related to places (e.g., *biblioteca, laboratorio,* etc.), the goal of the task could be to determine all of the places that the story characters frequented. During task completion, Student A and Student B would be instructed to determine each location visited by the story's characters based on their individually assigned videos.

Learning objectives and implementation

The specific learning objectives of this task are as follows: Students will be able to:

- **identify** the main events and details of their assigned story depicted in a video;
- collaboratively **summarize** the main events and details of a story depicted across two videos;
- collaboratively **discuss** the chronological order of the main events and details presented in the videos to **determine** the whereabouts of the story's main character and his diamond.

We propose some suggestions to implement, develop, and adapt this task to specific levels and learner profiles:

- *Work with this task in the Spanish intermediate level or in subsequent levels.* The task can be guided to help students communicate more in Spanish. This guidance can take the form of a step by step introduction to the characters and their names, the places they find themselves in, and the actions that take place in the story where vocabulary related to places (e.g., *laboratorio*) and objects (e.g., *carbón, diamante*) is provided and practiced before the task. After the students have completed the task and reached their conclusions, a guided in-class discussion of the events in the video whereby students justify their conclusions will allow them to orally express them further, listen to other classmates, and make adjustments to their perceptions of the task if needed.
- *During planning time, focus on the review of vocabulary and pronunciation of complex words* by reading a news report about a robbery that the students need to then summarize orally in their own words working collaboratively. This pre-task activity can foster students' improvement of fluency of speech production.
- *Create handouts (one for Student A and one for Student B) with some guiding questions related to the information in the videos.* Written questions such as "What are the professions of the characters in your video? Why is the diamond important in the story? What happened to César Cabral and where is he now?" will allow students some time to remember the structure and actions in the videos, reflect on the events of the story, and have something ready to present to their partners when they start the task. Preparation and reflection time will give way to a smoother description of the task by both parts.
- *Take into account students' orientation toward the task, and make instructions clear.* For example, it is possible that some students see the task as a game they have played in the past and, therefore, may not communicate much. Other students might see the task as one that mandates the use of certain linguistic structures and may likewise limit communicative

- *Manipulate the task to target the pronunciation of particular words that contribute to the aim of the task*, such as multisyllabic words. You may choose to add those words in the video or, if subtitles are included, highlight them in a different color. In this way, the task can be altered to be a focused task where attention to multisyllabic words, combined with the task repetition element, targets improved fluency. Additionally, consider recording new voice-overs to manipulate speech rate, pauses, prominence, stress, thought groups, etc.
- *Guide a follow-up discussion on regional variation, in this case on Peninsular and Argentinian Spanish, to encourage development of sociolinguistic competence*. The conversation can be introduced by asking what differences the students noticed in the pronunciation of words in the two videos. The words can be written on the board to provide specific examples for a brief explanation by the teacher about the pronunciation and intonation variation in both countries.

CONCLUSION

Tasks are believed to encourage attention to and meaningful practice of the target language for the purpose of facilitating its acquisition. Our task facilitates an environment for learning in several ways. For example, it requires information exchange given that learners cannot complete the task unless they exchange information. This information exchange, as well as the negotiation of the meaning that is driven by consensus reaching or collaboration (i.e., when learners have to come to an agreement on a decision; see Berwick, 1993) prompts input, interaction, and output, all key ingredients for language acquisition (Gass & Mackey, 2006).

Tasks further represent a promising avenue for meaningful practice that may facilitate pronunciation in L2s. These kinds of language-based interactions are not widely included in textbooks (to the best of our knowledge), and pronunciation-based activities need to be emphasized in language classrooms. In this teaching tip, we described a task designed for intermediate-level learners of Spanish to target fluency development. Considering the information gap, our task enables students to communicate the main events of a story that, in turn, generates extended speech production; this extended speech production is a precursor for the development of spoken fluency. By means of task repetition, our unfocused task is predicted to promote fluency, which, in turn, may promote global comprehensibility. A convenient feature of our task (and tasks in general) is that it can be manipulated in order to address different languages, language level, and area of focus, to name but a few.

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