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The future of the task concept – a look outside the box

**Abstract.** In this chapter I identify links between task concepts inside and outside of ELT. Recent developments in subjects such as Natural Sciences and Math, my argument goes, are helpful signposts for the future of the task concept inside ELT. I discuss these developments under four ‘focus points’ derived bottom-up from the research under review here: holistic concepts of competence, real world contexts, learner contributions and assessment.

1. **Introduction**

Looking “outside the box” at task concepts in other subjects emphasizes the fact that subjects do not exist in isolation, but are connected and should each make a specific and meaningful contribution to the curriculum as a whole. An overarching goal of modern education is enabling students to meet complex demands in and across social fields and helping them to tackle the core problems they are likely to encounter in life- and work-contexts (cf. Rychen/Salganik 2003: 58). While the modes of task construction are subject-specific to a degree, the theories of learning underlying them are remarkably similar. Science Education is a case in point:

- learning requires an active, constructive involvement of the learner and considerable time/practice are required to build up expertise;
- learning becomes more meaningful when insights are applied to real-life situations;
- learning is a social activity, and active participation in communities inside and outside of school is crucial;
- students learn best when their individual preferences are taken into consideration, and when participating in activities that they themselves find useful;
- students construct new knowledge on the basis of what they already know, understand and believe;
- students must learn to plan, monitor and evaluate their learning. (Dillon 2012: 97–98)

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The function of tasks is to connect such general theories of learning with students’ actions and to conceptualize learning from learners’ perspective (cf. MÜLLER-HARTMANN/SCHOCKER in this volume). As there is no way of improving the output of learning without improving learning processes, good tasks can be seen as prerequisites for sustained curricular development. They represent a “pivotal component of classroom design and implementation” (LEGUTKE/THOMAS 1991: 4) and can therefore become a “lever for innovation” in education (GIRMES 2004: 69). Good tasks can play vital roles in designing challenging learning scenarios, diagnosing and developing student competences and also serve as tools for teacher professionalization (KELLER/BENDER 2012). I now discuss promising avenues for achieving such professionalization through task design in four focus-points.

2. Focus on holistic concepts of competence

For the purpose of the following discussion, a distinction is made between integrated and complex proficiencies in a field, referred to as ‘competence(s)’, and smaller-scale characteristics or subroutines of such proficiencies, referred to as ‘skills’ or ‘abilities’. Nearly all the concepts of competence developed in the last ten years both in the humanities and natural sciences are holistic in nature: They assume that competences include cognitive abilities but also affective, moral, volitional and motivational factors. In the Natural Sciences, this led to new approaches to learning and task design. Instead of privileging “learning subject matter”, the new vision focused on “contexts of life situations that include science and technology […] that students will encounter as citizens” (BYBEE 2012: 51). Based on these precepts, new tasks and scenarios were developed involving issues such as cloning, stem cell research, genome projects, global warming or alternative fuels. Because of the central roles of both social and scientific factors, these were termed “socioscientific issues”, emphasising that “all aspects of science are inseparable from the society from which they arise” (SADLER 2004: 513).

Similar concepts inside ELT represent an important way forward for the task concept: We should focus on relevant social and cultural topics of given societies and on discourses relating to central political and ethical questions (cf. PIEPHO 2003: 60). Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is equally important here because it works on the premise that learners use language as social agents, accomplishing tasks in a specific environment and within a particular field of action (cf. MÜLLER-HARTMANN/SCHOCKER in this volume). If tasks are culturally relevant and meaningful to learners, they can trigger high quality interactive processes and lead up to consequential products, actions and outcomes. They will therefore not only increase students’ language proficiency but produce “ways of being in the world” (HALLET 2011: 97).

First, it is important for the future of the task concept to reclaim the full potential of holistic concepts of competence. This means that learning tasks equally promoting cognitive, social, emotive and ethical growth should be the norm, not the exception.
Such tasks should foster the close integration of related skills into a complex whole that is more than the sum of its parts, rather than developing and testing skills in isolation as is typical of psychometric approaches. Such a holistic view also underlies the concept of action competence originally developed by WEINERT (2001), which formed the basis for national competence standards in all German-speaking countries. Ironically, the potential of this concept for task design was undermined by the very tasks meant to illustrate (and measure) the achievement standards, as they focused narrowly on cognitive skills and algorithms that were easily testable. The way forward lies in the opposite direction: Tasks should integrate formal skills described in educational standards with meaningful topics by embedding them in complex learning scenarios.

Second, a holistic view of learning should involve its beginnings as well as its outcomes. Personal, volitional or social skills do not come out of nowhere but must be developed in parallel with cognitive abilities. Task-based learning sequences should allow students to bring their own thoughts, ideas and interests into play right from the beginning. In ICC task sequences, this can mean involving learners at an early stage and helping them become aware of their own cultural practices (cf. MÜLLER-HARTMANN/SCHOCKER in this volume). The pedagogic rationale is for students to experience effectiveness and agency early on, and to realize that their (imperfect) ideas and concepts are important. They should then have the opportunity to develop them in exchange with peers and experts. There is a long tradition in ELT which has seen these “implicit contributions” as central elements of learning processes (LEGUTKE/THOMAS 1991: 18). Working with tasks should include an appreciation of whatever learners bring to the classroom: their prior knowledge, experiences of world and life, preferences and attitudes (cf. Focus 3).

Third, we should embrace the view that the outcomes of learning processes are multidimensional rather than sequential, that prerequisite learning cannot be conceptualised as neatly packaged units of skills or knowledge, and that growth takes place on many interrelated fronts at once and is continuous rather than lock-step (cf. SADLER 1989: 122). Artefacts to document and evaluate this type of learning should include essays, presentations, posters etc. and not consist of testing isolated skills only. Tasks should be geared to outcomes showing students’ individual talents, ideas and interests, i.e. those areas where they are special and not comparable to others. Standardized tests alone are insufficient to monitor the effectiveness of output-oriented educational systems (cf. Focus 4).

3. **Focus on meaningful contexts and real-world situations**

Good learning tasks should help students to acquire those competences that they will need to understand the complex world around them, to make informed decisions, to participate actively in modern society and get their voices heard in it. In the Natural Sciences, for example, “critical thinking” has become a key competence in this context, both as a commitment to evidence and an empowerment for critical rationality. Corre-
sponding task sequences are action oriented in the sense that they focus on the kinds of questions relevant for modern democratic societies:

“Such activities may consist of physical, chemical and biological investigations of a polluted lake or they may embrace social science oriented activities such as interviews or document-analysis. Such activities are obviously valuable and productive to the extent that they facilitate motivation and the acquisition of knowledge. But in order to be characterized as actions, they must be targeted at effecting real change regarding the environmental problem that is being worked on” (JENSEN 1995: 326).

Good tasks will situate learning within real-life situations where connections become apparent between students’ ideas and decisions and the impact of these decisions on their lives. The task sequence “extracting DNA from a tomato” (HEITZMANN 2011) is a point in case. It involves a series of steps which allow students to observe DNA at first hand using household chemicals only. The mental operations are the following: Reading about the planned experiment and deciding how to document its different steps → doing and observing the experiment → finding proof that the extracted substance is indeed DNA → searching the internet for information about the first genetically modified tomato called “Flavr savr” → reflecting whether supermarkets should be allowed to sell genetically manipulated tomatoes and how to detect them.

The example shows what it means to develop learning tasks within a real-life context and on a holistic basis. A relevant topic is chosen and students get to work on it employing a range of activities typical for scientific inquiry: formulating hypotheses, documenting research processes, testing assumptions etc. This scientific savoir faire is then re-inserted in a social context where students are asked to ponder ethical questions and make personal choices. While the over-all approach is authentic and holistic, the sub-routines necessary for competent action are distributed across tasks with different focus points. This is important especially for real-life problems where information is not easily accessible and problems are open-ended, complex or ill-structured. Task design is thus not (only) a question of finding ‘real world’ issues for learning, but also of understanding the specific demands these issues make on students in terms of content-specific knowledge, learning strategies etc. In TBL, several systems to gauge task difficulty have been developed. NUNAN (2004: 85) proposes three intersecting sets of factors: Learner factors (i.e. confidence about task, motivation, language skills); task factors (i.e. cognitive complexity, amount of context, need for accuracy); and input or text factors (length, familiarity etc.). Such classifications should be expanded and linked to the concept of competence: What kinds of abilities do students need to solve certain tasks, and which ones will they acquire by working on them? The idea here is not to break down complex competences into smaller and smaller units which can then be taught and tested. It is involving students in complex problems while providing them with the ‘tools’ and abilities they need to come to adequate solutions.

An example from ELT is the study by KELLER (2013b), in which students at upper secondary level learnt to write and deliver a “good speech” in English. An analysis of task demands showed that in order to succeed, students must know specific linguistic tools of good speeches, have a positive self-image as speakers and be willing to use
language in a creative way. Based on this analysis, a task sequence was developed in which students first wrote and delivered a good speech by employing persuasive tools already at their command. They then studied speeches by experts (Martin Luther KING, Barack OBAMA) to enlarge their set of linguistic and rhetorical tools. Finally, they drafted a speech on a topic of their choosing, received peer and teacher feedback and delivered their speech in class. This task sequence significantly improved students’ linguistic abilities and their sense of audience in comparison to another group which had been taught in a more ‘traditional’ using worksheets.

Again, the arguments discussed in this section have a number of practical implications for the future of the task concept in ELT:

**First**, because real-life situations can only be mastered by orchestrating a number of sub-competences, the focus should be on developing sequences of tasks in the future. A useful concept here is the “scenario” as a group of tasks geared towards complex and holistic acts of thinking, speaking and acting (cf. PIEPHO 2003: 59). These should be complemented with transparent and demanding output-goals. Reaching these goals involves cyclical developments based on learners’ previous knowledge and active sense-making.

**Second**, as the focus is primarily on students handling authentic situations competently (not knowing certain linguistic structures in isolation), the principle of progression in such sequences cannot be (primarily) one of increasing linguistic complexity. Rather, it should be conceived as somebody learning to deal with complex problems in ever more sophisticated ways: in an informal address to a group of friends, a few structuring devices might be enough to make a speech convincing or memorable. When addressing a potential employer, a different and potentially wider range of lexical, structural and argumentative devices will be needed for communicative success. The more complex the question at hand, the more subtle the argument, the less familiar the audience, the more important formal aspects of language become. This again implies that a focus on linguistic accuracy should come later rather earlier in the L2-curriculum.

**Third**, a working knowledge of argumentation and rhetoric is key to any real-life situation where language and communication are involved. In principle, all language learners are serious, socially aware, morally responsible individuals who perform deliberate communicative acts. And there are many occasions when individuals do not blindly or willingly accept the pre-suppositions of discourse: People disagree, criticise, invent terms and meanings; they argue, challenge, persuade and change their minds. As learning to do so is part of any child’s normal development, it should also be possible in the L2 classroom, so the tasks of the future will have to find room for rhetoric as well as grammar.

**Fourth**, as language is not only a rule-governed, but a social enterprise, learners need to understand the most important conventions of L2 discourse communities and genres that they are likely to encounter in life. Genres are socially recognized ways of using language for communicative goals and knowing them means anticipating and meeting relevant audience expectations (cf. HYLAND 2007: 149). Suitable tasks might
include analyzing the linguistic, organizational and rhetorical modes of central genres in business or academic writing. They should enable students to understand the specific expressions typical of these genres and use them for their own communicative goals.

Fifth, a focus on real world situations does not necessarily mean a utilitarian turn towards genres that are ‘practical’ in the everyday meaning of the word. Much can be learnt about the world by studying literary and imaginative works. Especially literary texts invite us to participate in different times and cultures at an imaginary level. They engage our capacities for empathy and ask us to see the world from different perspectives and foster intercultural learning and understanding. There is a rich and long tradition of tasks in ELT to initiate, support and evaluate students’ interaction with literary texts (summarized in NÜNNING/SURKAMP 2006). This tradition has been somewhat marginalized in the wake of standardized testing and should be brought back into the limelight. As literary and imaginative works contain ‘real life’ and ‘real language’ in concentrated fashion, they should take a central role early on. They are among the brightest and tastiest tomatoes for foreign language education.

4. Focus on learner potential and contributions

The task concepts outlined so far share a common core: students are seen as subjects (not objects) of their learning, as active sense-makers and cultural agents who bring their own ideas, concepts and world-views to the classroom (cf. LEGUETKE/THOMAS 1991: 18). Here is another important link between ELT and Natural Sciences. In all subjects good learning tasks should:

- elicit learners’ personal ideas and concepts rather than assuming that they know nothing;
- provide learners with concrete experiences early on and support them with appropriate scaffolding to become familiar with the subject matter;
- offer a cognitive challenge without being overwhelming;
- include choices of activities and lots of opportunity for practice;
- offer plenty of time to think about problems and to discuss ideas with peers and experts;
- include on-time feedback (DILLON 2012: 98).

Empirical studies suggest that personal involvement positively affects student learning in the Natural Sciences. SADLER (2004: 518) showed that students’ personal connections to local issues (e.g. developing and planning a strategy to deal with a local environmental issue), together with the personal investment in the solutions proposed, accounted for better-than-expected patterns of argumentation. Curriculum developers taking their cue from such studies have started to select local issues that are relevant in students’ own communities or help them envision the connections that exist between more global issues and their own lives.

Here again, there are connections to traditions within ELT. Not only should tasks be geared towards current and real-worldly topics, they should also encourage students to approach these topics from their own personal angle. “Self access tasks” are a case in
point, allowing students to choose which parts of a task they want to work on (thematic focus) and how to access them (methodological focus). Such tasks should take students’ needs and interests into account, but also their fantasy and creative potential. They can make language learning more intense but also require teachers to be tolerant of delays and divergent or naïve answers (cf. PIEPHO 2003: 84).

Besides intensifying personal contact with a topic, tasks geared to maximising student agency have other, psychological advantages. They can contribute to raising self-esteem by showing students that their ideas are important contributions to the learning process. Fostering experiences of competence, autonomy and social relatedness in learning can lead to increased intrinsic motivation (cf. DECI/RYAN 1985). Furthermore, students’ existing knowledge often contains seminal ideas which can be transformed into ‘formal’ knowledge later on. It also yields important diagnostic information for teachers to decide how to structure future instruction (“adaptive teaching”). Diagnosis for learning should not be an isolated event but an integrated feature of task design (cf. HALLET 2011: 73).

It is usually students’ strengths and talents, their striking ideas, which are the key to further learning (cf. KELLER 2013a: 21). The best-known anecdote involving such an idea is based on a very dull task: A maths teacher gave his unruly class the task of adding up all the numbers from 1 through to 100, supposedly to keep them quiet. Much to his annoyance, one boy came up with the right answer almost straight away. He had used the associative law in mathematics, which states that no matter what order you add things up, you get the same result. So instead of 1+2+3+4 etc., he added 1 + 100, 2 + 99, 3 + 98, etc., leaving him with 50 x 101 = 5050. The boy was future mathematician Carl Friedrich Gauss.

For this anecdote to be a teachable moment, the roles of all the participants must be reversed: Tasks should encourage students to gain new insights and to make meaningful contributions to the developing discourse from the outset, learning to trust their own ideas early on. As few of these ideas are as striking as the one by Gauss, we need teachers who are experts at spotting seminal learner concepts like the proverbial needle in the haystack. Discovering an interesting argument in a halting speech or a useful persuasive tool in a chaotic paragraph is more powerful than diagnosing a learner’s deficits with a standardized tool. One function of good learning tasks, then, is to create a platform where students present their ideas, and a market-place where these can be tested and debated. The goal is to encourage “exploratory talk” (MERCER/LITTLETON 2007: 59) in which partners engage critically but constructively with each other’s ideas. The teacher’s role in this is to understand where the students are, use what they already know and help them to go back and forth across the bridge between everyday and educated ways of thinking (cf. ibid.: 18). Task-based learning in ELT should therefore be based on a process in which participants negotiate their positions, roles, values and ideologies through a process of useful exploratory dialogue (cf. MÜLLER-HARTMANN/SCHOCKER in this volume).

We need more tasks in ELT which do not trivialize learners by asking them to regurgitate what somebody else has thought before. This type of task should not be
limited to the upper levels, as learners can draw on a range of strategies to communicate despite limited resources (cf. Skehan/Forster 2001: 183). The learning tasks of the future should be built on a basic trust in the value of children’s thinking and in their unique ways of making sense of the world – from day one.

5. **Focus on assessment**

Assessment practices are typically among the most conservative and traditional aspects of teaching. In ELT, they still consist mainly of grammar and vocabulary tests (cf. Helmke [et al.] 2008: 373). At the same time, the future of the task concept will depend very much on the assessment forms associated with it (cf. Keller 2013a: 115). A closer look at recent studies shows that ELT researchers and curriculum developers have severely neglected assessment as an area for development in the last decade, yielding the ground mainly to test developing agencies. However, the alignment between learning and assessment should take centre stage in all future developments of the task concept. Standardized psychometric tests have become so dominant in the last few years because they convincingly tackled methodological issues such as objectivity or reliability. The trade-off, however, is that they are narrow in scope and far removed from everyday classroom realities. They are thus a bad fit for the type of task culture outlined in this chapter: They typically focus on cognitive skills which are easily testable within short periods of time; they mostly consist of tasks with fixed answers (clozes, re-orderings etc.) and do not capture personal, creative, social or motivational aspects of language learning. Because of their limited bandwidth they also have a problematic backwash effect on learning: Why should anybody get involved with competences that ‘do not count’? Imagine, for example, the devastating effect of students investigating “a polluted lake” and putting into place concrete ways of cleaning it up (above: p. 31), to be assessed solely on a multiple-choice test in Biology.

If the broad and holistic view of learning is not to be dismantled from the assessment-end, we need an investment in new tools of assessment to complement the tests. Portfolios are one example, defined as collections of authentic artefacts that students work on over a substantial period of time and that document a wide range of competences and learning outcomes. Portfolios are an ideal fit for task-based learning because they...

- can accommodate different outcomes or products such as essays, papers, posters, drawings (in electronic portfolios also websites, blogs, videoclips, audiofiles etc.);
- allow a wide range of competences to be documented, including collaborative and reflective efforts;
- show the context in which the work took place;
- encourage drafting, revising and reveal how students used feedback to improve their work;
• allow students choices (within the set framework) about what they want to work on (topics), how they want to work (methods) and what they want to be assessed on (choosing documents for the portfolio);
• allow school learning to be linked with learning in other contexts and make achievements visible for a wider audience (parent, peers, outside experts, etc.) (cf. KELLER 2013a: 137).

By collecting authentic student products and assessing them in a portfolio, we are seeking a read-out of learners’ more complex cognitive map and avoiding the compartmentalisation typical of psychometric tests. Such assessment is intended not only to rank students, but to produce competent students. The idea is not only to judge a piece of work against certain standards (often unknown to students), but to use standards as the basis for a dialogue on learning: What needs to happen for somebody to achieve a certain benchmark? By virtue of such interactions, assessment can yield information for students, not just about them (cf. STIGGINS 2008).

If portfolios are to become productive as assessment tools, however, the following key questions must be met at the outset:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Planning and Context</th>
<th>Communication</th>
<th>Organization</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are there clear and transparent goals for learning?</td>
<td>Are processes and products of learning documented and reflected on?</td>
<td>Are documents and products collected and selected by students themselves?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can learners take responsibility for their actions?</td>
<td>Is there a dialogue about teaching and learning?</td>
<td>Are portfolios used for assessment and appreciated in a wider context?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is the purpose of portfolios clear to all involved?</td>
<td>Is there on-time feedback about progress and quality of outcomes?</td>
<td>Are there consequences for subsequent learning?</td>
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Table 1: Success factors for implementing portfolios as tools for learning and assessment (based on INP 2010)

While portfolios are an excellent fit for the task-culture outlined here, they leave us with the difficult question of how to assess them in ways that are transparent, fair and economical. On the one hand, we will want to specify clear and appropriate achievement targets. On the other, we want to provide enough room for students’ personal, original or creative work.

The best way of dealing with this dilemma lies in using standards without tying them (exclusively) to narrow psychometric tests. Good standards and achievement criteria are important because they have meaning, they have labels, and they provide both the vocabulary and the tools necessary for making systematic judgements on performance. For most situations and tasks, certain aspects of quality can be specified at the outset (cf. SADLER 1989). In writing ‘good speeches’, these include (among others)
linking devices between paragraphs to show logical organization, metaphors and comparisons to produce memorable images or verbal repetition to fix issues in the audience’s minds (cf. KELLER 2013b). Such aspects can be set out in assessment rubrics which mirror current thinking in the field, align with state or school standards, are organized and understandable and distinguish clearly between different levels of quality (cf. STIGGINS 2008: 173). Once an artefact or portfolio is ready for assessment, these criteria become retrospective explanatory devices to help the assessor decide to what degree certain achievement standards have been met.

Every assessment must also be open, however, for events and outcomes that are unexpected and surprising. When students engage with complex problems over a longer period of time, they will learn a great number of things, some of which are unforeseeable but not, for that matter, irrelevant. By way of concrete example, suppose that in the project on ‘good speeches’ a normally very quiet and introverted student chooses a personally relevant but challenging topic. Defying expectations, she then delivers a moving and spirited speech which leaves her classmates dumbfounded. Some aspects of that performance could be attributed to known and expected criteria: treatment of topic, use of emphatic language devices etc. Others, however, could not: courage shown in this particular situation, overcoming fears and inhibitions, opening up new ways of personal language use. If an assessor appraised the student’s work solely on the basis of criteria fixed in a rubric, essential aspects of the performance might get lost, and competences highly relevant for the student’s personal learning trajectory would go unrecorded.

As no single rubric is applicable for all possible learning outcomes, assessment must also be guided by the artefact or portfolio itself, i.e. by those aspects which are out of the ordinary and invite attention. Competent judges will then select, from the large pool of possible criteria, those which are “remark-able” and therefore salient to a particular appraisal (cf. SADLER 1989: 134). Report cards or grading sheets should therefore have two sections: One which records whether central standards have been met, and one where personal and unexpected aspects of a performance are recorded (cf. KELLER 2013a: 128).

Assessing the personal dimensions of any achievement means that certain contextual factors need to be taken into account. Indeed, contextual information becomes key to an adequate assessment. In a psychometric approach, each performance is scored independently by readers with no additional knowledge of the students or the specifics of their work. An adequate understanding of learning based on a holistic concept of competence, however, presupposes a hermeneutic approach to assessment. This involves understanding the whole in light of its parts, repeatedly testing interpretations against the available evidence until each of the parts can be accounted for in a coherent interpretation of the whole (cf. MOSS 1994: 10). Such an assessment privileges readers who are most knowledgeable about the context in which the assessment occurs and thereby works best if grounded in the textual and contextual evidence. Taking contextual information into account would be consistent with the philosophical position that making evaluative judgments is a primary act of situational recognition, the justifica-
tion of which invokes relevant criteria from a larger pool of potential criteria (cf. 

Student portfolios typically contain quite disparate artefacts, and different assessors 
often do not instantly come to identical conclusions about their quality. This does not, 
however, invalidate such assessments as ‘subjective’, as it would in a psychometric 
context. In a portfolio, inconsistency in a student’s performance becomes a puzzle to be 
solved by searching for a more comprehensive or elaborated interpretation (cf. MOSS 
1994: 12). Initial disagreement among readers provides an impetus for dialogue, de-
bate, and enriched understanding informed by multiple perspectives, as interpretations 
are refined and subsequent actions are justified.

6. Outlook

A common theme in the research reviewed here has been designing curricula which 
allow students to integrate classroom learning with their personal lives (cf. SADLER 
2004). More often than not, this means giving learners the chance to discover 
knowledge for themselves through working on meaningful tasks rather than providing 
it for them at the outset (cf. MÜLLER-HARTMANN/SCHOCKER in this volume). Tasks in-
volving students in authentic, personally relevant problems can lead to specific and 
measurable gains in core competences while also increasing motivation and involve-
ment (cf. KELLER 2013b). Well-developed and empirically validated competence mod-
els in the relevant domains should be used to design and select appropriate tasks for 
learning and assessment. Such models can also serve as a basis for assessment rubrics 
to evaluate students’ work. In that context, we need more research to understand what 
happens when a specific group of students in a specific context works with a particular 
set of tasks. General abilities such as ‘writing’ or ‘speaking’, detached from context, 
are too complex and amorphous for most empirical investigations with a practical 
outlook. Instead, we need to investigate the reality of classroom learning and seek to 
understand how task properties interact with students’ interests and contextual factors 
to produce specific learning outcomes. In answering such contextualized questions we 
shall be chipping away at the bigger issues of identifying key factors in the acquisition 
of complex competences such as ‘speaking’, ‘writing’ or ‘arguing’. Furthermore, if 
students report that their interest in a particular area has grown, that they want to 
engage and find out more about it, this is already a significant result. There is no royal 
road to good teaching, but studying the reality of students working with tasks – al-
though a thorny path – will yield insights valuable to educational theorists and class-
room practitioners alike.

Setting tasks and observing students as they work with them is not only a research 
strategy, but also an important aspect of teacher professionalization. Innovation in the 
field should come from teachers inside the schools, not just researchers outside of it. 
MÜLLER-HARTMANN/SCHOCKER (in this volume) demonstrate that action-research set-
ings whereby teachers frequently exchange their views on tasks can be a fruitful start-
ing-point. Other activities such as adapting pedagogic models or cooperative task planning can ensure that teachers become active players in the field, not passive spectators. They should be able to judge what demands specific situations make of students and then design tasks which support them as they strive for adequate solutions. Equally, assessment should not become an administrative act from the outside but remain within the teachers’ and students’ joint responsibility, an integrated part of every learning process.

Teacher training and continuing education should encourage trainees to develop their own tasks using good models, implement them in their classrooms and evaluate the results in research based ‘learning in teaching’ projects. Such settings would show trainees how to take core processes of their profession into their own hands rather than waiting for the latest worksheet to become available for download. The future of the task concept lies neither with more sophisticated output standards, nor with ready-made practice material or standardized testing. It lies with the people directly involved in learning: The teachers developing and implementing tasks, and the students using them, transforming them and making them their own.

**Literature**


