

Activities for Task-Based Learning

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Introduction to task-based learning

Education, including language education, has become ever more student-centred over the past five decades. These changes have followed research findings about child and adult language development, cognitive processes and motivation. In language teaching, we now understand much more than we did about the natural developmental processes referred to as language acquisition, both as regards the first of a first and second (or subsequent) language. In the pedagogical literature, one approach that is robustly supported by research is task-based learning (TBL), which is referred to in the literature as Second Language Acquisition as task-based language teaching (TBL).

TBL has been one ingredient in various course materials, but there has always been a need for a single go-to resource both for varied and motivating classroom tasks, and for practical tips on using “task-based” interventions. We decided to write this book in order to address this need. It provides a collection of meaningful tasks, and offers suggestions both about specific “emergent” language that might arise during tasks, and about how this language might best be captured and put to use.

1. A brief history of task-based language teaching

The beginnings of a genuinely task-based approach in ELT are usually traced to N.S. Prabhu's Bangalore Project on which he worked between 1979 and 1984. This project was seminal because, in order to make English lessons appeal to the young people in the state secondary schools for which he was responsible for overseeing, Prabhu chose tasks as the basis of his syllabus, rather than the structural approach current at the time. He admits that he did this as a deliberate attempt to put principles into practice and reported his findings in his book *Second Language Pedagogy* (1987). The fact that the approach became so widely known in the mainstream of ELT is largely due to the work of Jane and Dave Willis in writing and presenting about TBL, beginning with the seminal *A Framework for Task-Based Learning* (1996). More recently, Mike Long has summed up an immense amount of scholarship relevant to TBL in his 2015 book *Second Language Acquisition and Task-Based Language Teaching*. At the same time there has been a steady growth in the number of coursebooks, both in general English and in ELT for specific contexts, which have included tasks as a key feature of each lesson unit, though conspicuously without using these as an organising principle.

What is a task?

A task-based syllabus puts the **range of communicative tasks** at the centre of what students have to do in the classroom. The easiest way to define a task is that it is something that students do as part of their everyday lives, or for which they need the second language. Tasks should be **purposeful** – engage your students in **real communication**, by which we mean that other participants in the tasks will have a **genuine reason to listen** to whoever is speaking.

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For the purpose of this book, we take a wide view of what a task can be – from participating in a job interview, giving a short presentation, from playing a game to designing parts of an advertising campaign. We hope that the tasks will also be engaging on a personal level, and fun.

Examples of classroom tasks with which readers may already be familiar are:

- versions of a well-known activity **Alibi**, in which students have to invent a story which will “match” as closely as possible with that of a partner to prove (under close questioning) they were not present at an imaginary crime scene;
- classroom surveys, in which students generate questions and poll the class in order to find out, for example, are the biggest shopaholics or the most health-conscious people in the class;
- an activity where students draw a time-line based on the important events in their lives and then pairs complete a blank time-line for a partner based on the events they are told about. They then look for similarities between their life stories.

2. Key principles of task-based learning

- TBL is a **student-centred** pedagogy. It is based on the belief that language learning should be helping students to say (better) what they want to say in English. Meaning is primary. Students are not given other people’s meanings to regurgitate. Instead, a task encourages students to share *their* opinions; *their* experiences; *their* solutions to problems. Skehan, P. (2004).
- TBL **prioritises meaning** because this is what language is ultimately for. It is important to make the distinction between rehearsing grammar structures, for whatever else the structuralist approach may be, it is precisely this conception of language that is at its core.
- **Accuracy develops out of fluency** and not the other way around. TBL is a **fluency first** approach. This has also been described by Patsy Lightbown and Nina Spada as a “get it right in the end” approach, and elsewhere as *using a language in order to learn it* – rather than the obverse! This approach holds that language is best learned within the context of communicative events because it is through having to manipulate language forms in order to express personal meanings that these forms become salient, and in the end memorable, for students. **Stages**, which many teachers think of as the most engaging part of lessons, **come early on in the timeline of the lesson**. The focus on specific language forms comes later. Teaching is most effective when the teacher follows the students’ lead by attending to and providing feedback on **emergent language**.
- Tasks are **social and physical** because language is profoundly social. Of particular importance in language acquisition are the interactions between students themselves, between the students and the teacher who is able to affect the learning process; and between the student and the wider linguistic community that she is a part of. A more radical but entirely plausible view is that, in addition to this, language is physically embodied; paralinguistic features such as facial expressions are an essential part of communication. Watching people gesturing frantically while talking on a hands-free phone set to someone who can’t see them offers evidence for this. (For a discussion of this idea, see Thornbury, S. 2005) This is why the best tasks are designed in such a way that they necessitate communication; students work together to reach a concrete outcome, such as solving a problem, comparing experiences, or creating something.

present. This methodology is based on the belief that out of accuracy comes fluency. A task-based methodology is based on the belief that out of fluency comes accuracy, and that learning is prompted and reinforced by the need to communicate.” Willis D. (1990) *The Lexical Syllabus* in Scott Thornbury’s *Language Teaching Methods* (2017: 64)

For example, in our **5a Nostalgia story** task, students first prepare and then share stories about past experiences; they are then exposed through a teacher model to the range of forms they could have

used (including ones they may not have e.g. *used to/would* for past habit), and analyse these, before preparing to repeat their stories with a new partner, and with more attention to the use of a wider variety of forms. (A pre-intermediate student may now try to incorporate *used to* into their repertoire; an upper intermediate may now try to incorporate *would* into theirs.)

- All this means that tasks should ideally be **authentic**. There ought to be some **relationship between a task and real-world activities**, whether this is more instrumental (e.g. a job interview) or more functional (e.g. comparing, listing, evaluating) – see the list of communicative situations below.

What about grammar?

We realise that the reality of much teaching is that most teachers operate with a coursebook with a **structure-based syllabus**, and that many students expect lessons to have a focus on concrete items. For the benefit of these teachers, **we have provided with each task a list of language items** (grammar, vocabulary, functional exponents) which are likely to arise as students do the task. This is an idea about how and when to focus on language. Note that the tasks are cross-referenced to a list of the most common language items in the index. (NB the language items accompanying each task are only as a guide and are not supposed to be exhaustive.)

Meanwhile, the advantage (for the busy teacher) is that, precisely because they are not primarily structure-based, the tasks here can be easily adapted for different levels. A teacher who uses any of the tasks will gain from this experience as they become more familiar with the language items that emerge naturally during the task performance. (See **emergent language** in the glossary.)

3. How do I choose tasks for my learning context?

In ELT, there has been some controversy about what constitutes a task for teaching purposes, as writers see different aspects as being essential.

According to what we might call a narrow conception of TBL, the tasks set for the students must be decided after a process of in-depth needs analysis. By means of questionnaires, an analysis of the contexts in which they need to use English, and standardised tests, students’ subjective needs (as they perceive them) and objective needs (defined in terms of situations in which they need to use English) are identified. The menu of tasks will then reflect, in such a way as possible how the students need to use the language for their purposes. It is hard to disagree with the pedagogic principles at work here – an ideal menu of tasks would be free from coursebook shackles, and once sequenced in terms of perceived difficulty, this would constitute the syllabus in its own right.

Some examples of how language is used in natural communicative situations, referred to in discourse theory as **functions**:

- asking questions
- reporting an event in the past
- talking about the way things used to be
- talking about future plans
- comparing and contrasting. See Finocchiaro, M., Brumfit, C. (1983)

Differing from this narrow view is a wider conception of tasks, briefly mentioned above. This includes the kind of pedagogic tasks that have been mentioned – that is, various classroom activities (games, role-plays, tasks like “speed-dating” etc.) which, despite not being drawn directly from real world contexts such as those of everyday academic life, nonetheless resemble real-life situations and allow the students to flex their communicative muscles. (Incidentally, it’s worth noting that Prabhu’s conception of tasks was even wider, including both rule-focused and form-focused activities!)

"The games (s) play, the problems they solve, the experiences they share, may or may not be the thing that they will do in real life, but their use of language, because it is purposeful and real, will replicate features of language use outside the classroom." Willis & Willis (1996)

While we are aware that this is a compromise position, we have ensured that the tasks remain as far as possible student-centred in that they are fun, communicative, and relevant to students' needs. Many of them reflect the kind of functions listed above. They all enable students to produce a wide variety of language forms in the performance of the task, and these language forms can be focused on after the task in various ways – or not at all, if you are uncomfortable with the idea of explicit language instruction.

Finally, as part of each task, we have included short sections on how to vary the subject matter in the design. This is so that you can match tasks as far as possible to the interests and language needs of your particular students.

4. Research evidence supporting a task-based approach

"What we know about language learning strongly suggests the primacy of meaning negotiation supported by a focus on form, as proposed by SLA. Klapper, J., & Rees, (2003). Reviewing the case for explicit grammar instruction in the university foreign language learning context. *Language Teaching Research*, 7(1), 28–31

From Mike Long – Long M., **In Defense of Tasks and Tools: New Myths and Real Issues**, *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 36 (2016) CUP

As pointed out in the introductory section above, task-based language teaching is well supported by research findings from **Second Language Acquisition (SLA)**. This is largely because it primarily **learner-driven** in terms of the language which arises in the task, which follows the **student's "internal syllabus"** rather than the pre-determined syllabus of a book or teacher. Ever since Larry Selinker introduced the key concept of **interlanguage** in 1972, teachers have been made aware of the existence of (more or less) fixed developmental sequences in language acquisition. Researchers have always disagreed about the value of instruction, but an important consensus emerges: instruction can expedite the acquisition process, but appears to do little to alter the sequence of structures which are acquired.

Related to this is the fact that SLA involves both the conscious and unconscious processes at work in language learning, and allows plenty of scope for the unconscious processes to operate, which seem to be more involved in learning than they are sometimes given credit for.

"Instruction is successful when it triggers temporary episodes of explicit learning as an aid to subsequent implicit processing."

Mike Long, **Second Language Acquisition and Task-Based Language Teaching** (2015) p.50

In the history of SLA research, a distinction is frequently drawn between **implicit** and **explicit learning**. The former is, according to Mike Long, "learning without awareness of what is learned" and can often occur **incidentally**, that is, when the student is paying attention to something else, and simply attends to words and structures as they arise in context, rather than focusing on them consciously outside the stream of communication. Because this is the way we learn our first language, it must be true that the overwhelming majority of language learning happens in this way; Long calls it the "default process".

Implicit learning, by contrast, is **intentional** and conscious. This is the kind of learning that happens in typical classroom situations when second (or first) language students are asked to focus on certain structures or vocabulary items; commit words and phrases to memory; and engage in accuracy-focused practice.