

TASK BASED LEARNING: A COMMUNICATIVE ALTERNATIVE FOR EFL TEACHERS AND LEARNERS

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Abstract: TBL is an approach that makes the task the basic unit for planning and teaching. It contrasts with approaches that are centred around grammar because it involves the specification not of a sequence of language items, but of a sequence of communicative tasks to be carried out in the target language. TBL aims to engage learners in real language use. This can be done by designing tasks which require learners to use the language for themselves. Tasks hold a central place both in current SLA research and in language pedagogy. Tasks serve to provide learners with a natural context for language use. As learners work to complete a task, they have opportunities to interact, which are thought to facilitate language acquisition. The difference between traditional approaches to teaching English, such as PPP, and TBL is that in TBL, the focus on language form comes at the end as the communication task is the central point to the framework. Therefore, a typical TBL lesson consists of 'pre-task', 'task cycle' and 'language focus' stages. This paper aims to explain the content of the stages, giving English language teachers some ideas about the kind of activities for each of them.

Keywords: task-based learning.

1. TASK-BASED LEARNING (TBL)+

TBL is an approach that makes the *task* the basic unit for planning and teaching (Thornbury, 2006: 223). It contrasts with approaches that are centred around grammar, for example, because it involves the specification not of a sequence of language items, but of a sequence of communicative tasks to be carried out in the target language (Willis & Willis, in Carter & Nunan, 2001:173).

TBL aims to engage learners in real language use. This can be done by designing tasks which require learners to use the language for themselves (Willis & Willis, 2007). In other words, as Thornbury (2006) suggests, according to TBL, ‘you learn a language by using it,’ not ‘in order to use it’ (p. 223).

1.1. What is a *task*?

In fact, it is a bit problematic to define *task* as a term because as Zhao (2011) also states, there is not a complete agreement about what constitutes a task. Willis (1996) defines a task as an activity where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose in order to achieve an outcome. In this definition, the *outcome* is important because although the activity involves the use of language, the focus is on outcome. Language in a communicative task is seen as a tool that brings about an outcome (Seedhouse, 1999).

Tasks hold a central place both in current SLA research and in language pedagogy (Ellis, 2003). As Larsen-Freeman (2000) points, tasks serve to provide learners with a natural context for language use. As learners work to complete a task, they have opportunities to interact, which are thought to facilitate language acquisition.

1.2. Background

In fact, TBL has originated from Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). It is just a strong version of CLT (Zhao, 2011: 46). Despite the CLT’s focus on communicative competence, there was still a tendency to see the study of language form as prior to language use due to the need in promoting accuracy as well as fluency.

In the meantime, Prabhu headed a project in schools in South India, and this project was one of the first experiments with TBL. In this project, learners were presented with a series of problems and solved these through information and opinion gap activities under teacher guidance through the medium of English. Later he argued that a focus on language form inhibited language learning, and language development was the outcome of natural processes (Willis & Willis, in Carter & Nunan, 2001).

TBL gained official popularity when Jane Willis published *A Framework for Task-based Learning* in 1996. In the book, she stated that she had been into TBL since the early 1980s not only because she was unhappy and unsatisfied with the traditional PPP method, but also because she was influenced by Prabhu’s procedural syllabus experiment.

1.3. Principles of TBL

According to Willis (1996) there are three essential conditions, which are exposure, use, and motivation; and one desirable condition, which is instruction for successful learning. Chowdury (2014) summarizes Willis' ideas as follows:

Exposure involves a comprehension of meaning and the conscious observation of other people's use of the target language. It is when such features are noticed and processed in the learners' minds. Through exposure learners get the necessary input.

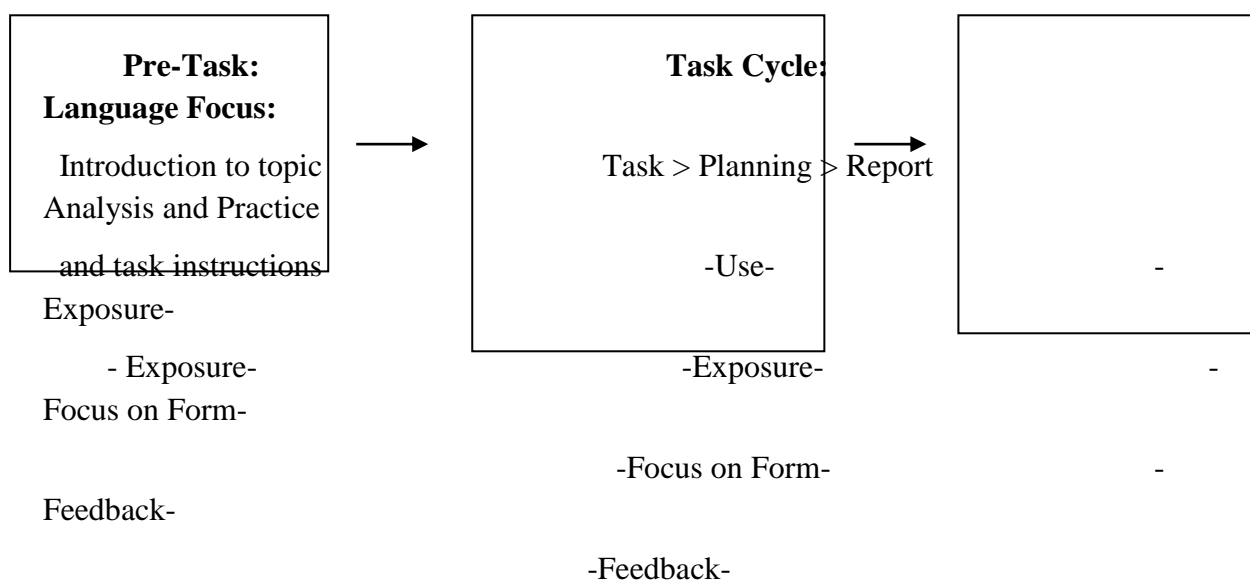
Use is basically concerned with speaking and writing unlike exposure that is mainly associated with reading and listening. Through the use of the target language, learners are pushed to make the expected output. The use of language through tasks prepares learners to make free and meaningful use of the target language.

Motivation is needed to process the exposure. It enables learners to benefit from the exposure and use. The TBL framework can be used to motivate learners. For example, students get motivation through success. If they see that they can accomplish the tasks easily, they will be motivated and look for more tasks.

Instruction should motivate learners to engage in language use rather than teacher control. Instructed language learning should primarily involve natural language use, based on activities concerned with meaning rather than language.

1.4. Procedure

According to Willis (1996), the difference between PPP and TBL is that in TBL, the focus on language form comes at the end (p. 52). As the communication task is the central point to the framework, such a procedure is more useful than the PPP cycle. A typical TBL lesson is structured as follows:



Pre-Task: Introduction to topic and task instructions: This stage provides *exposure* to teacher talk, but brainstorming useful topic words and phrases is a way of involving students.

Task Cycle: At this stage, learners use language in varying circumstances and are *exposed* to others using it. In the *Task* Phase, learners can *use* language interactively and spontaneously in pairs, and mistakes don't matter. The *Planning* Phase is when the teacher provides input and advice, so there is some focus on form and feedback. At this stage, learners plan what to say at the report stage by trying to use accurate language. The *Report* Phase encourages a combination of accuracy and fluency.

Language Focus: Analysis and practice: At this stage, learners have a chance to focus on form and ask questions about language features as they get exposure to the language from the task cycle. For example, there can be consciousness-raising activities such as identifying, classifying, and focusing on specific language features. These help learners systematise what they already know while noticing new things about language and the way it is used (Willis, 1996).

1.5. Criticism

Proponents of TBL favour the way it combines fluency and accuracy. However, some others criticize TBL due to some factors. One criticism is about the issue of feedback. Some criticize the fact that learners get no correction or feedback during the *task* phase and argue that the feedback that learners get while on task is more effective than post-task. To overcome this limitation, Thornbury (2006) suggests the use of *recasts*, which is the teacher's reformulating learners' statements in a more target-like way.

Some others criticize the fact that there is no focus on form at the *pre-task* stage although it might be necessary to pre-teach grammar items that might be needed during the task. According to Willis (1996), this is one difference of TBL from PPP.

Finally, TBL is criticized for being a influential more at the theoretical and research level than actual classroom practice because it requires a totally different course design and testing procedures. In addition, it presents a management challenge because it is difficult to set up and monitor tasks in large classes. Also, it might be difficult to deal with language problems that emerge spontaneously from the task performance (Thornbury, 2006: 224).

2. RELEVANCE OF TBL TO LEARNING CONTEXTS

TBL is applicable in a variety of teaching and learning contexts. According to TBL, learners are free to use any language they can to achieve the outcome. Language forms are not prescribed in advance. Language learners, who are human beings, have an innate capacity to work out the ways of expressing meanings. In real life, people do not simply take note of the new linguistic input and copy or reproduce it. Instead, they put language to use to achieve

purposeful communication. Therefore, they adjust or adapt input to create new meanings (Willis & Willis, in Carter & Nunan, 2001). TBL aims to achieve this through principles that are parallel to SLA principles. This way, learners can be encouraged to create a meaning system in TBL. Thus, the fact that its principles are realistic and naturalistic is the reason why TBL would suit a variety of learning circumstances.

In order to overcome what was criticised about TBL as its limitations, teachers need to prioritize their purposes with regards to the facilities they have. That is, they need to determine whether they want to incorporate the communicative element in their classes along with the form and accuracy or they want to continue with the traditional PPP approach. If they prefer the former, then, it is possible to involve tasks to overcome these limitations. For instance, as Larsen-Freeman (2000) suggests, teachers can add *information-gap*, *opinion-gap* (*reasoning-gap*), or *problem solving tasks* in their courses and overcome limitations regarding the management or course design. The variety that these tasks offer can provide the base for a lot of teaching contexts and.

Finally, according to TBL, working with upper-level learners whose needs can be clearly defined, it is possible to offer pedagogic tasks which relate directly to real-world tasks. Also, the idea that language emerges out of the relationship between exposure, use, focus on form and feedback makes a lot of sense. Therefore, TBL is applicable and a better alternative to PPP.

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APPENDIX: A SAMPLE TBL LESSON

Time	Stages & Aims	Procedure	Timing of the Activity	Interaction	Materials
5 min.s	Pre-Task	<p>1. T. shows pictures to elicit the topic of the lesson (Festivals).</p> <p>2. Sts. talk in pairs about what activities are there at a festival (1 min.). Later, they tell their ideas to T. T. aims to elicit words such as <i>theatre, cinema, poetry, fireworks, dance, comedy</i>, etc.</p>	5 min. s	T-Sts Sts-T St-St	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pictures • Board • Board marker
20 min.s	<p>Task</p> <p>Planning</p> <p>Reporting</p>	<p>1. In groups, sts. plan their night out at this festival by expressing their preferences and making a conversation. T. does not provide any help. Sts. do what they can do.</p> <p>2. In groups, sts. plan what to say when they come on the stage to report their night out at this festival. Sts. are focused on accuracy. T. is ready to provide input and advice if sts. need.</p> <p>3. 2-3 groups come on the stage and report what they have planned. They speak out the conversation they got ready. By the way, other sts. provide feedback about the content of their friend's conversation. They answer questions such as <i>Do you agree? Would you like to attend the same events?</i> etc.</p>	<p>5 min.s</p> <p>5 mins.</p> <p>10 min.s</p>	T-Sts Sts-T T-St St-T St-St Sts-Sts	
25 min.s	Post-Task	1. Sts. listen to a sample conversation and complete the statements in the handout individually (Appendix A). Then,	10 min.s	T-Sts Sts-T T-St St-T	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening Handouts (Appendix A)

	<p>Analysis</p> <p>Practice</p>	<p>they compare with their peers. T. hands out the key.</p> <p>2. T. elicits statements to focus on the form.</p> <p>3. Sts. do the practice handout in pairs. T. provides the key (Appendix B).</p>	<p>10 min.s</p> <p>5 min.s</p>	<p>St-St</p> <p>Sts-Sts</p>	<p>x A)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice Handouts (Appendix B) • Board • Board marker
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LESSON APPENDICES

Appendix A: Listening Handout

A. Listen and complete the sentences with the words in the box.

than (x2)	prefer	love
rather (x2)	keen	fancy

1. I don't _____ that.
2. I'd _____ to go to the classical concert.
3. I'd _____ see the film.
4. I'm not that _____ on the concert.
5. I'm more interested in the Japanese drummers _____ the one-man theatre show.
6. I'd _____ to see the drummers.
7. I'd _____ see that _____ a play about Shakespeare.

B. Which sentences in Exercise A:

- a. mean you like one thing more than another thing:
- b. mean you don't like / prefer something:
- c. mean you like / prefer something:

KEY:

A. Listen and complete the sentences with the words in the box.

than (x2)	prefer	love
rather (x2)	keen	fancy

1. I don't **fancy** that.
2. I'd **prefer** to go to the classical concert.
3. I'd **rather** see the film.
4. I'm not that **keen** on the concert.
5. I'm more interested in the Japanese drummers **than** the one-man theatre show.
6. I'd **love** to see the drummers.
7. I'd **rather** see that **than** a play about Shakespeare.

B. Which sentences in Exercise A:

- a. mean you like one thing more than another thing: **5, 7**
- b. mean you don't like / prefer something: **1, 4**
- c. mean you like / prefer something: **2, 3, 6**

Tape script:

Paul, Emma, Christine

- P: OK then, so what shall we do after dinner? What's on at about eight o'clock, Emma?
- E: Well, there's a classical music concert in the castle or else an open-air movie. What would you prefer to do, Christine?
- C: I'm not sure, what kind of film is it?
- E: It's an Indian film, a Bollywood film, you know, with loads of songs and dancing. This one's a romantic comedy.
- C: Hmm, I don't fancy that. I'd prefer to go to the classical concert. What about you, Paul?
- P: I think I'd rather see the film. I'm not that keen on the concert. I don't really like classical music. What about you Emma, what would you rather do?
- E: Well, to be honest, I don't mind. I like all music. The movie sounds good because I've never seen a Bollywood film before, and they're good fun, the dancing's brilliant, so I've been told. But, the concert sounds good because it's in the castle, and I think that'll be lovely, a really good atmosphere for the music.
- P: It's in the castle?
- C: Yes, in the main hall. Are you more interested now?
- P: Yes, I am. We haven't been to the castle yet, and I'd like to see it at night.
- C: Great! Let's go to the concert then. What shall we do after that?
- E: After that?
- C: Oh yes, Emma, no one goes to bed before midnight during the festival. You have to see as much as you can.
- E: OK, fair enough. Well, I'm more interested in the Japanese drummers than the one-man theatre show.
- C: Yeah, the drummers do sound interesting, but perhaps we shouldn't go to a second music event.
- E: Hmm, maybe Paul, which would you prefer to go to?
- P: Oh, I'd love to see the drummers. They sound amazing. And it's a great chance to see something different and unusual. I'd rather see that than a play about Shakespeare.
- C: But it says that the play's really funny. And how interesting is two hours of drumming going to be?
- E: Oh Christine, I'm sure the Taiko drumming will be really interesting. I've seen some of it on TV, and I'd love to see it live.
- C: OK then, let's go and see the drummers. But tomorrow, no music. OK?
- P&E: OK.

Text:

EDINBURGH FESTIVAL

AFTER DINNER EVENTS (8 p.m. – 11 p.m.)

CASTLE CLASSICS

Great music, great orchestra, great location.

Tonight: The world famous National Orchestra perform Beethoven's Symphony No.3 in the main hall of the wonderful Edinburgh Castle.

MOVIES IN THE PARK

Enjoy movies from around the world in the festival's outdoor cinema – the popcorn is free!

Tonight: *Hum Tum* – an Indian film made in the true Bollywood style. This is a romantic comedy filled with great songs and dances

LATE NIGHT EVENTS (11 p.m. –2 a.m.)

MINI-THEATRE

Powerful plays with the smallest of casts.

Tonight: *Shakespeare – A Writer's Life*. One actor performs the full story of Shakespeare's life. He acts as Shakespeare, his mother and father, his wife and even his children. You'll laugh out loud.

WORLD BEATS

Music and dance from all around the world.

Tonight: Japanese Drumming. An incredible performance by 45 drummers that you'll never forget. Powerful and unique.

Appendix B: Practice Handout

KEY LANGUAGE: expressing preference

3 Choose the correct verb forms to complete the phrases.

- 1 I'd love *being* / *to be* the first person.
- 2 I'm not keen *on going* / *on go* to the Eiffel Tower,
- 3 I'd prefer *not* / *not prefer* to visit a museum,
- 4 I don't mind *to do* / *doing* that.
- 5 I'd rather *go* / *going* for a walk than stay in bed.
- 6 I'd like *staying* / *to stay* in bed.

4a Hank, Joey and Tilly are from New York. They're visiting Paris for a long weekend. Complete the conversation with the sentences from Exercise 3.

HANK: Right then guys, let's sort our schedule. We get there Thursday evening, so, what shall we do Friday morning?

TILLY: ¹ 6

JOEY: Stay in bed! What do you mean? We haven't got time to stay in bed.

TILLY: I know, but I'll be tired. ² _____ or a gallery or anything like that.

HANK: Well, why don't we go for a nice walk by the River Seine?

JOEY: OK, that sounds good. ³ _____. Perhaps we can find a nice place for a late breakfast. Tilly?

TILLY: Sure, that sounds fine. And, shall we go to the Eiffel Tower in the afternoon?

JOEY: Yes, ⁴ _____. The view should be fantastic from there.

HANK: Oh, I don't know. ⁵ _____ in the afternoon.

TILLY: Really? Why not?

HANK: Well, I think it'll be very busy. We should go early in the morning when it's quiet.

TILLY: Yeah, good idea. ⁶ _____ to go up the tower. What shall we do in the afternoon?

JOEY: We could go and see some modern art at the Pompidou Centre?

HANK: Great idea! That's decided then.

