TASK-BASED INSTRUCTION IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CONTEXT AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR LESSON PLANNING

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Abstract: What is task-based learning? Or should that be 'task-based language teaching'? How do you use it in a lesson? What's the difference between this and project-based learning? Read on!

Task-Based Learning (TBL) is a lesson structure, a method of sequencing activities in your lessons. Sometimes called 'task-based language teaching', in TBL lessons, students solve a task that involves an authentic use of language rather than complete simple questions about grammar or vocabulary. Task-based learning is an excellent way to get students engaged and using English. That, plus the collaborative element, builds confidence in language and social situations. It's also been shown to align with how we learn a language..

Key words: TBL Classes, PPP-style course book, motivated, well-designed, weaker groups, monitoring, peer reviews.

Introduction. So why doesn't everyone use TBL all the time? Well, there are several disadvantages to task-based learning, which we'll look at in a minute. A lot of teachers try it once, it falls flat, and they don't use it again. A big part of that first failure is that the 'task' isn't a task.

So What is a Task? Good question. TBL calls for a specific kind of task, one that fits these requirements: It involves meaningful communication A 'gap' between what the students know to prompt communication (e.g. they have different information or a difference of opinion). Students can choose how to complete it and which language to use. There's a clear goal, so students know when it's completed. A task could be to create a presentation, some media, a piece of text, or a recorded dialogue. It could be trying to find the solution to a practical problem, like planning a complex journey, or deducing missing information, like working out who started a rumour at school. It could even be justifying and supporting an opinion, like arguing for your preference in an election or your favourite competitor in a TV show.

Discussions and results. Whichever task you choose, like 'present, practice, production' (PPP), task-based learning is a structure with three stages:

1. The Pre-Task

This is where you introduce the task to the students and get them excited about the task. Once they're engaged, then you should set your expectations for the task. Do this, so the 'less motivated' students don't do the bare minimum. To do this, you could show the students an example of the completed task or model it. If you want to differentiate your students, then now is an excellent time to hand out support materials or scaffold the task appropriately. Group them and give instructions. The focus of the stage is to engage the learners, set expectations and give instructions.

2. The Task

Begin the task!

Small groups or pairs are good, rather than a larger group where shyer students can 'hide'. Ideally, you won't join in the task, but you'll monitor and only give hints if students get stuck. A note here on task design — there are several ways to design a task, but usually (as mentioned

above), it should involve a 'gap' of some sort. Read this article for ideas on how to do this. The focus of this stage is fluency - using the language to communicate without using L1 unless needed.

3. A Review

Once the learners complete the task and have something to show, it's time to review. Peer reviews are preferable, or if you see an error common to many during your monitoring, a teacher-led delayed correction is also very useful. For weaker groups, peer correction can be made more effective by giving the students support on providing feedback — perhaps via a checklist or a 'things to look for' list. The aim for this stage is accuracy — reflecting on completed work and analysing it.

Advantages of Task-Based Learning

• Student interaction is 'built in' to the lesson, as they need to communicate to complete the task.

• Students' communication skills improve.

• Students' confidence can improve as tasks can mimic real life.

• Students' motivation can improve due to the same reason.

• Students' understanding of language can be more profound as it's used in realistic contexts.

Disadvantages of Task-Based Learning

• Tasks have to be carefully planned to meet the correct criteria.

• It can take longer to plan.

• It's also time-consuming adapting PPP-style coursebook lessons.

• Too much scaffolding in the early stages can turn a TBL class into a PPP class.

• Students can avoid using the target language to complete the task if:

• Tasks aren't well-designed

• Students aren't motivated.

• Students are too excited.

• Students feel lazy

We believe there are more ways for a task-based learning class to 'fail' (or rather, for it to go wrong) than a presentation, practice, production class. I'd recommend that a teacher grasp the basics (classroom and behaviour management, especially) before starting to experiment with TBL classes.

Three Reasons TBL Classes Go Badly

Here are three reasons TBL classes typically go wrong and what to do about it.

1. If Tasks Aren't Well Designed

What happens: Students might get into the task, but if it's designed around communication, then there's no need to talk, and students can complete the task by themselves. Which inevitably happens. Why it happens: there's no gap in the task (see earlier) Solution: design your task with one of the communicative gaps mentioned earlier. Here's a helpful podcast where I discuss task design.

2. If Students are 'Lazy' or Bored

What happens: Students will do the bare minimum to complete the task. They'll avoid the target language and use the most straightforward language they know, even single-word utterances, to get by. Why it happens: the topic isn't interesting, hasn't been presented clearly, they don't understand, or there's no rapport with the teacher.

Solution: choose an interesting topic/context/material for learners, grade your language appropriately, check your instructions, and work on rapport building.

3. If Students are too Excited

What happens: students are so excited to complete a task that they revert to a mixture of crazy interlanguage, body language and shouting ("That.. Here! No, wrong, it, it - [speaks own language] - ta-da! Teacher, teacher, done!") Why it happens: they're over-excited and want to complete the

task as soon as possible. The good news is that you chose a topic, context and materials connected with them - congratulations! The bad news is that it got in the way of the task…

Solution: If you expect your task to excite the students, make sure that you set the standards very clearly. Show a model of some kind, and be clear about the minimum standard. If appropriate, quantify it; "you have to record at least 20 lines of speech, everyone must speak at least three times…" and so on.

Further Observations on Task-Based Learning

I've noticed that with enthusiastic advanced learners, a model isn't as important and might even be a bad idea. Giving a model can steer your students in a particular direction, as they think that's what you want and try to please you. Not providing a model lets them use their imagination and creativity. Conversely, a model is necessary for younger or weaker learners, or there's a danger of ending up with low-quality work. Task-based learning seems to be slowly changing its name, as more people call it 'task-based language teaching'.

Conclusion. You might have heard of 'project-based learning' (PBL) - the only real difference between that and task-based learning is that PBL is usually run over periods longer than just one lesson and with more review stages..

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