

# **Task-based Language Teaching:** **teachers' solutions to problems encountered**

**Jane Willis**

**Honorary Visiting Fellow, Aston University**

## **Identifying tasks: not 'Is this a task?' but 'How task-like is it?'**

'We can determine how task-like a given activity is by asking the following questions. The more confidently we can answer *yes* to each of these questions the more task-like the activity.

- a) Does the activity engage learners' interest?
- b) Is there a primary focus on meaning?
- c) Is there an outcome?
- d) Is success judged in terms of outcome? Is completion a priority?
- e) Does the activity relate to real world activities?'

These criteria do not constitute 'a watertight *definition* of what constitutes a task, but they will provide us with *guidelines for the design of activities* which are task-like in that they involve *real language use*.' (Dave Willis & Jane Willis *Doing Task-based Teaching* OUP(2007).

## **Seven types of task:**

Listing, Ordering & Sorting (sequencing, ranking, classifying), Matching, Comparing, Problem solving, Sharing personal experiences, Projects and creative tasks.

## **Frequently asked questions concern:**

time pressures (lack of time to design tasks and do them in class), learners' attitudes and motivation, use of L1, integrating grammar, perceptions of progress, fear of losing control of class or language

## **Making time for tasks in class: some solutions**

Use **class time** for experience of **real language in use** that learners might not get outside class, especially **spontaneous spoken interaction**.

**Out of class:** some **text book activities** are best done at **learner's own pace** – set these for homework, to be checked quickly at start of next lesson. Get learners to:

- prepare topic and task related vocabulary at home prior to the task
- do form-focused exercises (grammar, vocabulary) for homework
- do the listening / reading and follow up activities in their own time

Encourage **independent vocabulary learning** and **out of class projects / surveys**.

## **Adapt text-book activities - four parameters you can adjust:**

### **1 Goal / outcome**

Make sure the **final goal / outcome** is clear to students; break it down into **stages** (with opportunities for exposure and output) so learners know (precisely) how to achieve it. Put in extra steps for a lower level class.

### **2 Pre-task preparation time**

Individual learners can think ahead how to do the task (strategic planning) and plan the language they need. This helps to stimulate engagement.

But sometimes let them do a task without preparation, spontaneously (involves different skills).

**3 Interaction patterns:** individuals, pairs, groups, whole class. Plus or minus individual **roles:** chairperson, spokesperson, secretary, editor, language advisor.

### **4 Post-task activities**

- planning and giving a report of the task
- reflecting & repeating the task with other partners
- comparing recordings of task done by others
- form focused study, noting useful words, phrases and patterns
- learners recording themselves summarising or repeating the task
- reflecting and evaluating on the process.

## **Task Sequences**

**Priming & preparation (mini tasks) >> Target task (s) & Planning & Report >> Form focus**  
(Such sequences provide exposure (input), chances to use language (output) and analyse form.)

## **Task-based teaching: some principles**

- Aim at richer interactions in class – focus on meaning first, form later
- Use your text-books flexibly: bend them, ‘taskify’ them
- Explore what happens when you use tasks: get learner feed-back
- Collaborate with your colleagues – ‘collaboration is the key’.

**The text-books used to illustrate my talk were:** *Face2Face* Pre-intermediate, Chris Redston and Gillie Cunningham. 2005 CUP; *Natural English* Intermediate, Ruth Gairns and Stuart Redman. 2002 OUP; *Face2Face* Elementary, Chris Redston and Gillie Cunningham. 2005 CUP; *New Headway English Course* Beginners. Liz and John Soars. 2000 OUP; *Inside Out* Intermediate, Sue Kay and Vaughan Jones. 2000 Heinemann Macmillan; *New Cutting Edge* Elementary, Sarah Cunningham and Peter Moore with Frances Eales. 2005 Longman.

## Further Reading on TBL and References

### On how people learn languages (in and out of classrooms):

Lightbown, P. and Spada N. (2004) *How Languages are Learned* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Williams, J. (1995). Focus on form in communicative language teaching: Research Findings and the classroom teacher. *TESOL Journal*, 4(4),12-16.

### On applying and researching a TBL approach, designing tasks, integrating grammar to TBLT, and exploring task-based interaction:

Edwards, C. and J. Willis (eds) 2005. *Teachers Exploring Tasks in ELT*. Palgrave MacMillan. Prize winner - British Council ELT Innovations Awards 2006

Willis D. 2003. *Rules, Patterns and Words: Grammar and Lexis in English Language Teaching*. Cambridge University Press

Willis, D. and Willis, J. (due March 2007) *Doing Task-based Teaching* OUP

Willis, J. and Willis, D. (1996). (Eds.). *Challenge and change in language teaching*. Oxford: Heinemann/MacMillan ELT.

Willis, J. (1996). *A framework for task-based learning*. Harlow, U.K. Longman Addison- Wesley.

### More books and articles about Task-based Learning

Bygate M. P. Skehan and M. Swain (eds) 2001. *Researching Pedagogic Tasks: Second language learning, teaching and testing*

Ellis R. 2003. *Task-based Language Teaching and Learning*. Oxford, OUP

Estaire S. and J. Zanon, 1994. *Planning Classwork: a task-based approach*. Oxford: Macmillan Heinemann

Foster P. 1996. 'Doing the task better: how planning time influences students' performance'. In Jane Willis & Dave Willis (eds) *Challenge and Change in Language Teaching*. Heinemann pp17-30

Leaver B.L. & J. Willis, (eds) 2004. *Task-based Instruction in Foreign Language Education: practices and programs*. Washington DC, Georgetown University Press. (See Chapter 1 for an overview of TBL perspectives and practices).

Littlewood, 2004. 'The task-based approach: some questions and suggestions' in *ELT Journal Volume 58/4:319-326*. O U P

Prabhu N.S. 1997 *Second Language Pedagogy*. Oxford University Press

Ribe R.1997. *Tramas creativas y aprendizaje de lenguas: prototipos de tareas de tecera generacion* Universitat de Barcelona

Skehan P. 1996. 'Second language acquisition research and task-based instruction'. In Jane Willis & Dave Willis (eds) *Challenge and Change in Language Teaching*. Heinemann pp17-30

2002. 'A non-marginal role for tasks' in *ELT Journal Volume 56/3:289-295*Oxford University Press