Task-based Language Teaching: teachers’ solutions to problems encountered

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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 feedback
- Collaborate with your colleagues – ‘collaboration is the key’.

Further Reading on TBL and References

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


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

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

More books and articles about Task-based Learning

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