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Doing Task-based Teaching

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INTRODUCTION

Doing Task-based Teaching has been written for language teachers who want to gain a better understanding of how task-based teaching (TBT) works in practice. It aims to give beginner teachers the confidence to start using tasks in their lessons, and help experienced teachers to widen their repertoire of tasks and task sequences. It draws on the classroom experiences not only of the writers themselves, but of over 30 teachers in twelve different countries. These committed teachers have sent in examples of tasks they have designed and used successfully in their lessons. In the book we take further account of the realities of the classroom by looking at ways of combining a task-based approach with current coursebooks.

Chapter 1 begins by exploring some commonly held views on TBT and addressing some common misconceptions. It distinguishes between approaches that begin with a focus on grammatical form and those that begin with a focus on meaning, and looks at the principles that underpin them. It explores the meaning of the term 'task' and argues that a teacher-controlled focus on grammar should come at the end of a task cycle.

From Chapter 2 onwards, the emphasis is very much on *doing* task-based teaching.

Chapter 2 describes four practical sequences of meaning-focused activities leading to a focus on form. These sequences are used to illustrate a coherent and accessible explanation of some basic theories and principles behind TBT.

The next three chapters (3, 4, and 5) focus on designing tasks. They illustrate a variety of different task types, and look at ways of grading, appraising, and evaluating tasks. For each task type, there are examples of specific tasks used in classrooms round the world, as described by the teachers who used them. There is detailed advice on generating effective tasks for different levels of learner and on integrating reading and writing activities.

Chapter 6 distinguishes between a focus on language in use and a focus on form in isolation. It explores stages in a task cycle where learners are naturally concerned with improving their language and becoming more accurate (language focus). Turning to a focus on form, the chapter illustrates how different items can be identified and taken from the language of the spoken or written texts associated with a task sequence and used as the basis for form-focused exercises. Many examples are given and there is advice on finding and creating texts and preparing for examinations.

Chapter 7 looks at typical classroom discourse and explores how far it can be extended to reflect the language used in the discourse arenas of the world outside. The use of tasks opens up a far wider potential for real-world language use, especially when teaching students with specific needs. This chapter describes 'real-world' tasks that incorporate everyday English and electronic communication. It lists typical features of spontaneous spoken English, examples of which can be brought into the classroom. It acknowledges the difficulties in dealing with variable social dimensions and illustrates task sequences leading to role-plays designed to highlight the social

dimension. Finally, it explores the roles of a TBT teacher—as a manager of discourse as well as a purveyor of knowledge.

Chapter 8 illustrates ways of adapting and refining tasks to tailor them more precisely to the needs of specific classes, to make them more engaging and to guard against minimal participation by less motivated learners. Planning a task-based lesson involves making decisions about pre- and post-task activities, the outcome, interim goals and structure of the task, interaction patterns and the degree of accuracy, and/or spontaneity. The chapter also illustrates the need to devise very clear instructions. Each of the seven broad parameters in task design is further broken down into specific aspects that can be adjusted or 'tweaked' in different ways. Readers are encouraged to experiment by changing one such aspect to see what difference it makes in their lessons and to plan a small-scale action research project.

Chapter 9, on task-based syllabus design, outlines the problems with starting from an itemized language-based syllabus and looks at different meaning-based approaches to syllabus design. It discusses task-based syllabuses for the design of ESP, general, examination, and coursebook based courses, as well as courses based on learner outcomes or 'can do' statements. Starting with topic lexis is essential to facilitate task-based interactions, and the problem of integrating systematic language coverage in TBT can be solved through use of a pedagogic corpus. Finally, there is an explanation and summary of a set of procedures for syllabus design.

Chapter 10 takes up the most frequently asked questions about TBT that have not already been answered in the first nine chapters. It begins with a summary of the most commonly reported problems with TBT, and then responds to questions that arise out of these problems, such as integrating TBT into the prescribed coursebook. It looks at ways of turning textbook activities into tasks, making time to do tasks in class, dealing with large classes, stimulating unmotivated and unwilling learners, combating overuse of L1, and handling mixed ability classes. The chapter includes much advice from the teachers who contributed tasks and it ends with their most useful tips for teachers who hope to implement TBT in the future.

Reader activities are included at intervals throughout the book and follow-up activities and further reading appear at the end of most chapters. These activities aim to help readers to reflect constructively on what has gone before or to prepare for what is coming in the next section. There are also activities of a more practical nature, applying the ideas in the preceding section to the reader's own teaching context, for example, designing a specific task and writing task instructions for a class of their own, planning a task-based sequence, identifying useful language features in a text, and designing form-focused exercises for those features. Many activities could be used to promote constructive discussion or provide the basis for written assignments on teacher training programmes.

The Appendices include lesson plans and commentaries for tasks, projects and scenarios, tape-scripts, a sample course outline, and a sample handout that can be used in a workshop on task design. The aim is to supply teachers with enough data so they can adapt and try these tasks out with their own classes and plan their own form-focused materials.

Note on terminology

The book is entitled *Doing Task-based Teaching* and we have on the whole used TBT as the short form to refer to task-based teaching. Of course, where teaching goes on, learning does, too —or so we hope! The reader will, therefore, find TBL used from time to time, particularly when we are quoting from the work of others.

Dave Willis and Jane Willis, Kendal, Cumbria, February 2006

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1.1 What do you think about task-based teaching?

Proponents of task-based teaching (TBT) argue that the most effective way to teach a language is by engaging learners in real language use in the classroom. This is done by designing tasks—discussions, problems, games, and so on—which require learners to use the language for themselves. But TBT is not the same the world over. Teachers who begin with the notion that tasks should be central to teaching then go on to refine an approach which fits their own classrooms and their own students. (See Edwards and J. Willis 2005.) Before going on to discuss TBT in greater detail it is necessary to look carefully at some of the things which are important in a task-based approach.

READER ACTIVITY 1A

The essentials of a task-based approach

Think about what you have heard about TBT and say how far you agree with the following statements:

1 Many people can operate effectively in a foreign language even though their grammar is limited and they make a lot of mistakes.
2 Learners will not be able to do a task unless they have the right grammar.
3 TBT accepts the importance of grammar.
4 TBT is not suitable for learners who are preparing for an examination.
5 You do not have to be a highly experienced teacher to use TBT effectively.
6 You cannot do TBT unless your own English is completely fluent and accurate.
7 TBT can be used to teach both the spoken and the written language.
8 Tasks are always done in pairs or groups.

Commentary

Here is a commentary on these eight statements:

1 Most of us know someone who fits this description. Some years ago we were shown round the city of Prague by a Czech friend whose English was very limited. He was rarely able to produce a full sentence without at least one or two mistakes. He rarely used a past tense form, yet he managed to tell us all about the Prague Spring of 1970 using present tense forms with appropriate past adverbials. Even with his severely limited English he was fluent and entertaining. The important thing was that he was willing to make the most of the English he had. This is one of the most valuable things we can give a learner: the confidence and willingness to have a go, even if their language resources are limited. Many of us fall into this category ourselves with respect to at least one foreign language which we use occasionally but have never mastered.

2 This depends what you mean by 'the right grammar'. Learners talk about the past long before they have control of the past tense: they say things like 'Yesterday I play tennis'. Long before they have proper control of question forms they can make questions using intonation and interrogative words:
    Where you live?
    What you want?

In commenting on the previous question we pointed out that learners can be highly resourceful language users, creating complex meanings even with a limited grammar. One of the most important things about TBT is that it promotes learners' confidence by providing them with plenty of opportunities to use language in the classroom without being constantly afraid of making mistakes. Once they have a stock of words they can begin to communicate. And, once they begin to communicate, we can help them shape their language so that it becomes more complex and more grammatical.

3 Most current approaches to TBT certainly recognize the importance of grammar. Today task-based activities are almost always followed by one or more form-focused activity. Many traditional methodologies begin by teaching grammatical forms and then go on to set communicative activities in which they believe learners will be able to use those forms. The initial aim of TBT is to encourage learners to engage in meaning with the language resources they already have. This makes learners acutely aware of what they need to learn. They are then given form-focused activities to help them develop that language. They may later do a repeat task which gives them the opportunity to incorporate some of the language they have focused on at an earlier stage.

4 TBT is certainly not designed with examinations in mind. It is designed to produce learners who can use their English in the real world outside the classroom, even if that language is grammatically inaccurate. If an examination genuinely tests learners' ability to use the language, then TBT will prepare them for this very effectively. Unfortunately some examinations set a much higher premium on grammatical accuracy than on the ability to use the language. But TBT can be adapted to prepare learners for examinations of this kind. In Chapter 6 we will look at form-focused activities within the context of a TBT programme. The form-focused activities which follow a task can be designed or supplemented to reflect the sort of question that learners will face in the examination.

5 Any teacher will need basic classroom skills—the ability to motivate learners and organize activities in the classroom. They will also need to be able to demonstrate and explain important language features. So an experienced teacher who already has these skills will start with an advantage. But the most important thing in TBT is the willingness to engage with learners in communication, and to allow learners the freedom to use the language. Some experienced teachers find this very difficult because they are used to controlling learner language in order to avoid mistakes. TBT requires a willingness to surrender some of that control. Teachers who come to the classroom with an open mind, whether they are experienced or inexperienced, will learn to use TBT effectively if they have the confidence to trust the learners and give them every opportunity to use the language for themselves.

6 Sometimes teachers who don't have confidence in their own English respond by controlling learners very strictly, so that they can predict almost everything that will happen in the classroom. But if learners are always controlled, they will never learn to use language freely. They need an English-speaking model, and the best model they can get is a teacher whom they respect. So try to use English freely in the classroom even if you do make some mistakes. Mistakes are a natural part of spontaneous use. Once learners are involved in a task which engages their interest, they won't even notice them. So use your English to talk freely to learners: don't deprive them of the best learning aid they could possibly have. You are much more valuable as a model than the cassette recorder, or CD, or video screen.

7 Many people believe that TBT focuses almost entirely on the spoken language. There is certainly a lot of talking in the TBT classroom, from both teachers and learners, but TBT can also be used to teach reading (see Chapter 3) and to provide valuable writing practice as illustrated in later chapters.

8 It is true that many task-based teachers like learners to work in pairs or groups. This is generally because this gives learners more opportunities to use the language for themselves. But TBT can certainly be accommodated within a teacher-led classroom (see Chapter 7), and one of the most successful practitioners of TBT, N. S. Prabhu, used a teacher-fronted methodology (Prabhu 1987), working always with the class as a whole.

1.2 Starting with form and starting with meaning: alternative approaches to teaching

Some approaches to language teaching, which we will call form-based approaches, are based on the belief that we need to take great care, at each stage of learning, that learners produce the language accurately. Usually this involves a focus on form at the very beginning of a teaching sequence. By a focus on form we mean that teachers isolate one or two specific forms, specific grammatical structures or functional realizations, and identify these as the target forms. Learners know that by the end of the teaching sequence, often contained in a single lesson, they will be expected to produce these forms with an acceptable level of accuracy.

A well known form-focused approach is often known as PPP (Presentation → Practice → Production). This begins by highlighting one or two new forms and illustrating their meaning. It then goes on to practise that form under careful teacher control. This control is gradually relaxed until finally learners are offered the opportunity to produce the target form(s) in a communicative activity. This approach has four main characteristics:

1 A focus on one or two forms, specified by the teacher, which are later to be incorporated in the performance of a communicative activity.

2 This focus on form comes *before* learners engage in communicative activity.

3 Teacher control of learner language. This is imposed strictly in the early stages of the cycle and gradually relaxed.

4 The success of the procedure is judged in terms of whether or not learners do produce the target forms with an acceptable level of accuracy.

Other approaches, which we will call meaning-based approaches, are based on the belief that it is more effective to encourage learners to use the language as much as possible, even if this means that some of the language they produce is inaccurate. Teachers provide learners with opportunities in the classroom to use the language for genuine communication. This involves a focus on *meaning*. Inevitably, in the course of a meaning-focused activity, learners will sometimes naturally focus on language for themselves. They will, for example, stop for a moment to think 'How do I best express this next idea?', 'What's the word for X?', or 'Should I be using the past tense here?' When this happens learners are not simply thinking about forms specified by the teacher and how best to incorporate these forms in their output. They are thinking about language in general and searching their own language repertoire to decide how best to express themselves in a given communicative situation. We will call this a focus on *language*. Sometimes this focus on language involves teacher participation too. Teachers repeat learner utterances, reshaping them to make them clearer, or supply words or phrases to help learners shape their message. When teachers do this they are acting as participants in the interaction. As long as teachers are doing this in order to help learners with communication we regard it as a focus on language.

Finally, teachers direct learners' attention to specific forms which occur in the course of a task or an associated text. They may exemplify, explain and practice these forms. This we will call a focus on *form*. Teachers should take care that this focus on form does not detract from a focus on meaning. The simplest way to do this is to withhold this focus on form until after a task has been

completed. Sometimes this focus on form is incidental. The teacher stops a learner and offers correction. This correction is aimed primarily at ensuring that the learner is aware of the correct form. It is not offered to help with meaning. When teachers do this they are standing outside the interaction and commenting on learners' performance with regard to accuracy.

We are, then, looking at a three-way distinction:

• A focus on *meaning*, in which participants are concerned with communication.
• A focus on *language*, in which learners pause in the course of a meaning-focused activity to think for themselves how best to express what they want to say, or a teacher takes part in the interaction and acts as a facilitator by rephrasing or clarifying learner language.
• A focus on *form* in which one or more lexical or grammatical forms are isolated and specified for study, or in which the teacher comments on student language by drawing attention to problems.

Long (1988) makes a similar distinction, but uses different terminology, contrasting a focus on *form* (singular) with a focus on *forms* (plural). Roughly speaking, what he refers to as a focus on *form*, we have referred to as a focus on *language;* and what he refers to as a focus on *forms* (plural), we have referred to as a focus on *form* (singular).

A meaning-focused approach normally involves a focus on meaning and a focus on language *before* a focus on form. Meaning-based approaches have the following characteristics:

1 The teacher does not attempt to control learner language.
2 The success of the procedure is judged on whether or not learners communicate successfully.
3 At some stages during a meaning-focused cycle of activities learners and teachers will focus on language. Learners will pause to think how best to express themselves and may discuss different options with fellow students or look for help in a dictionary or grammar book. Teachers will participate in the interaction by helping learners to shape and clarify what they want to say.
4 Focus on form comes after focus on meaning. Advocates of a meaning-based approach will spend most of the time in the classroom on activities which promote communicative language use, but will supplement these with activities designed to promote accuracy. Course books which take a form-based approach encourage teachers to devote a lot of time in the classroom to form-focused activities, presenting specific forms of the language to their students and practising those forms. They will, however, almost certainly reinforce these activities with opportunities for communicative language use.

1.3 Language as meaning

When children begin to use their first language they communicate without using sentences. Early utterances may simply consist of pairs of nouns like 'book table'. Depending on the context and intonation and the accompanying gestures this may be interpreted as 'The book is on the table', or 'Please put the book on the table', or 'Shall I put the book on the table?' Relying on a shared context, children manage to convey meanings quite effectively without using grammatical sentences. Much the same is true of learners at the elementary level.

Taking this observation as a starting point, one might argue that early communication is primarily lexical and that grammar plays a subsidiary function. Let us put this to the test by looking at a text which has minimal grammar:

> Mother little girl. Mother say little girl go see grandmother. Mother give little girl big basket food. Mother say 'You take food grandmother ...'.[1]

We feel reasonably confident that many of you will have identified the opening of the story of *Little Red Riding Hood*. It is not true to say, however, that we have simply a string of words to tell this story. If we had offered you the sequence:

> Mother girl little. Say mother grandmother go see girl little. Basket big food girl little mother give. Say 'Grandmother food take you ...' mother.

You would certainly have found this much more difficult, perhaps impossible, to interpret. What, then, is the important difference between the first and the second versions of the story?

You might answer this by saying that the word order in the first version makes sense. More precisely, you might say the first version follows the conventions of English clause and phrase structure. Each clause has the structure 'subject + verb + ...'. In the phrases 'little girl' and 'big basket' the adjective comes in front of the noun. So the first version does conform to some of the rules of English grammar. It follows the rules of English word order, the rules of English clause and phrase structure.

[1] We are indebted to Andrew Wright for this striking example.

So, it is possible to tell a story quite adequately with a string of words and a very limited grammar of structure. There are no definite articles or indefinite articles in the first version of the story, and no other determiners such as 'this/that' or 'his/her'. There are no verb tenses. This raises an interesting question. If things like articles and tenses are unnecessary why do we bother with them at all? The answer, of course, is that articles and tenses are far from unnecessary. Even in the telling of a simple story we can make things much easier for our listener by using the full resources of the grammar:

> Once upon a time there was a mother who had a little girl. The little girl was going to see her grandmother. Her mother gave her a big basket of food and said 'Take this food to your grandmother'.

So grammar is vital if we want to make things reasonably easy for listeners or readers.

It is also difficult to express complex abstract meanings without grammar. One day our daughter, Jenny, was playing in the garden with her two-year-old son. He was filling a bottle with water from an outside tap, pouring the water in a hole he had dug and watching it disappear. Jenny was thirsty and asked him for the bottle. When he gave it to her she drank some of the water. He was