

Task-based approaches to teaching and learning languages¹

What is a task-based approach?

We all do tasks every day; they are central to our lives. Many tasks require us to use and understand language. Typical language-based tasks are going to the post office to send a parcel, or making an appointment at the doctor's. According to where we are and who we are with we may perform language-based tasks in our mother-tongue, in another language in which we are competent or in a language that we are learning. In their classroom, language learners can try to complete tasks that need language in a safe environment.

As a language teacher these days, you will be familiar with tasks to at least some extent. Most modern coursebooks are based on the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). CLT aims to help learners use language in real communication and this real communication often takes the form of tasks. CLT tasks are often designed to give learners practice in particular communicative functions, for example, 'suggesting', or in particular structures, for instance, the 'going to future'. Unlike many earlier approaches CLT encourages genuine interaction amongst learners.

Obviously a task-based approach also requires the learners to do tasks! So what is different about a task-based approach? Well, both approaches make use of tasks but with a different emphasis. We could sum it up this way: in CLT tasks provide communicative practice for language items that have been introduced in a traditional way. For example the teacher presents some phrases for making suggestions in a context such as two friends with problems. The practice task that follows is a role-play in which A has a problem and B has to make helpful suggestions (using the phrases presented by the teacher) with the goal of getting A to accept one of them.

Task-based language teaching on the other hand sees tasks as giving learners direct and immediate experience of language use in communication. *Focused tasks* together with *pre-tasks* and *feedback on tasks* allow learners to notice language forms, to use them under real operating conditions and to receive feedback on their language use. Priority is given to getting something done through language rather than to practising predetermined language items. The emphasis is therefore on task outcome or product, not on whether learners used a particular language form to complete the task. In other words they have been successful if they got the task done, regardless of what language they chose to do the task.

Tasks may involve products we find in the real world, for example, learners could be asked to produce a restaurant guide for their town (real-world task). Or the task may involve an artificial or classroom-oriented product such as producing clues for a crossword puzzle (pedagogic task). In both cases however, the learners will need to use real-world language functions such as making suggestions and negotiating. But their task is to create an end product, not to practise 'making suggestions'. Meaning is paramount.

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Why use a task-based approach?

There are three main reasons for using a task-based approach to teaching and learning.

1) It would seem sensible to predicate our teaching on the best available current knowledge about how people learn a second or foreign language. Research into language acquisition suggests that language learning is not like adding bricks to a wall one by one. Instead it is a developmental, organic process in which competence in the target language grows by using it in meaningful activities (Lightbown 1992, Mackey 1999).

2) It is an “action-oriented approach” (Trim et al 2001) that fosters communicative linguistic competences. These competences are the basis of the CEF (Common European Framework) ‘can-do’ descriptors that represent the goals towards which many of our adult learners will be working.

3) A task-based approach is motivating for teachers and learners. It provides learners with interesting challenges and is clearly related to their language needs. It is obvious to the learners that their classroom work will help them to operate effectively in English.

Using a task-based approach teaching with *First Choice*

Now let’s look at what happens in the classroom when you use a task-based approach, taking our examples from the coursebook *First Choice A1*.

Task types

If learners are to benefit from this approach we need to make sure that they try out a variety of task types. A good coursebook series should offer learners:

- information gap tasks in which they exchange pieces of information to complete a task,
- opinion gap tasks in which learners think about and state their personal preferences, attitudes or feelings in order to complete a task,
- reasoning gap tasks in which learners create new information or a new product by putting together various bits of data.

The tasks should also require learners to use a number of different sub-task types such as listing, selecting, ordering and sorting, comparing, evaluating, solving problems, sharing personal experiences and creating a product.

Pre-tasks

In a good coursebook we would expect to find pre-tasks where necessary. Pre-tasks are activities that:

- allow the learners to see the logic in what they are being asked to do in the task,
- often input the language the learners will need for the task,

- prepare and motivate the learners to perform the task.

Pre-tasks may involve performing part of the task or a simpler version of the main task, being given a model of the task, activating relevant background knowledge or planning how to perform the task.

First Choice A1

First Choice A1 includes a variety of task and sub-task types. *Pre-tasks* are included wherever necessary. The three examples below will illustrate this.

Information gap task: Make a mini-restaurant guide

In Unit 4 the learners can enjoy exchanging information about restaurants they know to create a local restaurant guide. In the *Pre-task* your learners listen to a conversation in which two people exchange information about good restaurants they know. This model conversation helps them when they move on to the *Task*. While working on the *Task* the learners can look at the *Useful Language* box as a support so that they are able to ask and answer about restaurants. This part of the *Task* can be tackled in small groups whose members create notes about the restaurants they want to include in the mini-guide. Finally the notes from the different groups are put together and a complete class restaurant guide can be produced.

Opinion gap task: Plan something special together

In Unit 12 learners have the opportunity to plan to do something special together. In the *Pre-task* your learners reflect on their plans for the coming weekend and fill in a blank diary page. Then they talk to a partner about their plans. This *Pre-task* activates relevant background knowledge, that is, a clear picture of what you are doing the next week and how to ask someone else what they are doing next week. In the *Task* your learners look at the pictures and choose one of these special things or some other special evening out. Then using their diary from the *Pre-task* they can look for companions to join them at the special event. While doing the *Pre-task* and *Task* your learners will have practised ordering, sorting and comparing items in English.

Reasoning gap task: design a poster for your town or city

In Unit 9 learners design a poster that illustrates the attractions of their town or city. First they work on the *Pre-task* in which they make categories and then collect vocabulary relating to their town. To do this they need to share and sort the vocabulary they can remember. Once again, the *Pre-task* has functioned as an activator of background knowledge, but this time the knowledge is vocabulary necessary for the *Task*. The learners then work in small groups to pool their ideas, evaluating and selecting what they want to put on the poster. They are also beginning to learn to negotiate in English by asking each other the questions in *Task* (2).

What about accuracy?

There is nothing in task-based language teaching that forbids attention to correct forms! The approach used in *First Choice* focuses on meaningful interaction while getting learners to notice and use correct forms. This ‘noticing’ is promoted in three ways. Firstly, as illustrated above, the *Pre-tasks* will often highlight useful language forms. Secondly, the *Useful language* boxes in the *Task* sections provide a

resource of correct language items that learners can choose to use while doing their *Task*. Thirdly, the teacher can deal with accuracy in the feedback stage (*post-task*) of the task cycle.

Making a task-based approach work in your classroom

- 1) Foster a class atmosphere that encourages trust and sharing, so that learners are willing to share real information about each other.
- 2) During the *Pre-tasks* and *Tasks* check that the learners understand what they have to do, assist them with any problems, and input language items if help is requested. Note down how your learners are coping with the *Task* and note good or problematic use of language, but do not correct them and do not join in.
- 3) After learners have done a *Task*:
 - give feedback as to whether the learners successfully achieved the *Task*,
 - input language that they needed but did not use, point out significant errors and tell them what they did well.

There are many other, more familiar course components in *First Choice* as well as task-based teaching and learning. Furthermore the *Tasks* are clear and well-supported so it is an easy way in to task-based learning if that is new to you or your learners.

References and bibliography

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