Task Based Learning

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TBL METHODOLOGY-" WHAT IS TASK BASED LEARNING"

Task based learning is a different way to teach languages. It can help students by placing them in real-life situations, where oral communication is essential for doing a specific task. Task based learning has the advantage of getting students to use their skills at their current level, developing language through its use. It has the advantage of placing the focus of students toward achieving a goal where language becomes a tool, making the use of language a necessity.

Why choose TBL as language teaching method? We have to ask ourselves this question, because if we, as language teachers, don't know which method we are teaching, or if we do not think about teaching methodology in relation to the different types of learners, levels, materials and last but not least to the learning processes of the individual learner, we might as well not teach!

Therefore, when we choose TBL, there should be a clear and defined purpose for that choice. Having chosen TBL as language teaching method, the teacher thereby recognizes that "teaching does not and cannot determine the way the learner's language will develop" and that "teachers and learners cannot simply choose what is to be learned". "The elements of the target language do not simply slot into place in a predictable order" (Peter Skehan 19). This means that we, as teachers, have to let go of the control of the learning process, as if there ever was one! We must accept that we cannot control what each individual learner has learnt after for example two language lessons and as Peter Skehan says "instruction has no effect on language learning" (18).

In TBL the learner should be exposed to as much of the foreign language as possible in order to merely observe the foreign language, then hypothesize over it, at the individual level, and finally experiment with it.

One clear purpose of choosing TBL is to increase learner activity; TBL is concerned with learner and not teacher activity and the teacher is responsible for producing and supplying different tasks which will give the learner the opportunity to experiment spontaneously, individually and originally with the foreign language. Each task will

provide the learner with new personal experience with the foreign language and at this point the teacher has a very important part to play. He or she must take responsibility for the consciousness raising process, which must follow the experimenting task activities. The consciousness raising part of TBL is crucial for the success of the method, it is here that the teacher must help learners to recognise differences and similarities, help them to "correct, clarify and deepen" their perceptions of the foreign language. (Michael Lewis 15). All in all, **TBL is language learning by doing.**

"TASKS are activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome" As defined by Willis.

This means a task can be anything from doing a puzzle to making an airline reservation.

A Task-Based approach to Language

- allows for a needs analysis to be matched to identified student needs
- is supported by the research findings of classroom-centred language learning
- allows evaluation to be based on testing referring to task-based criterion
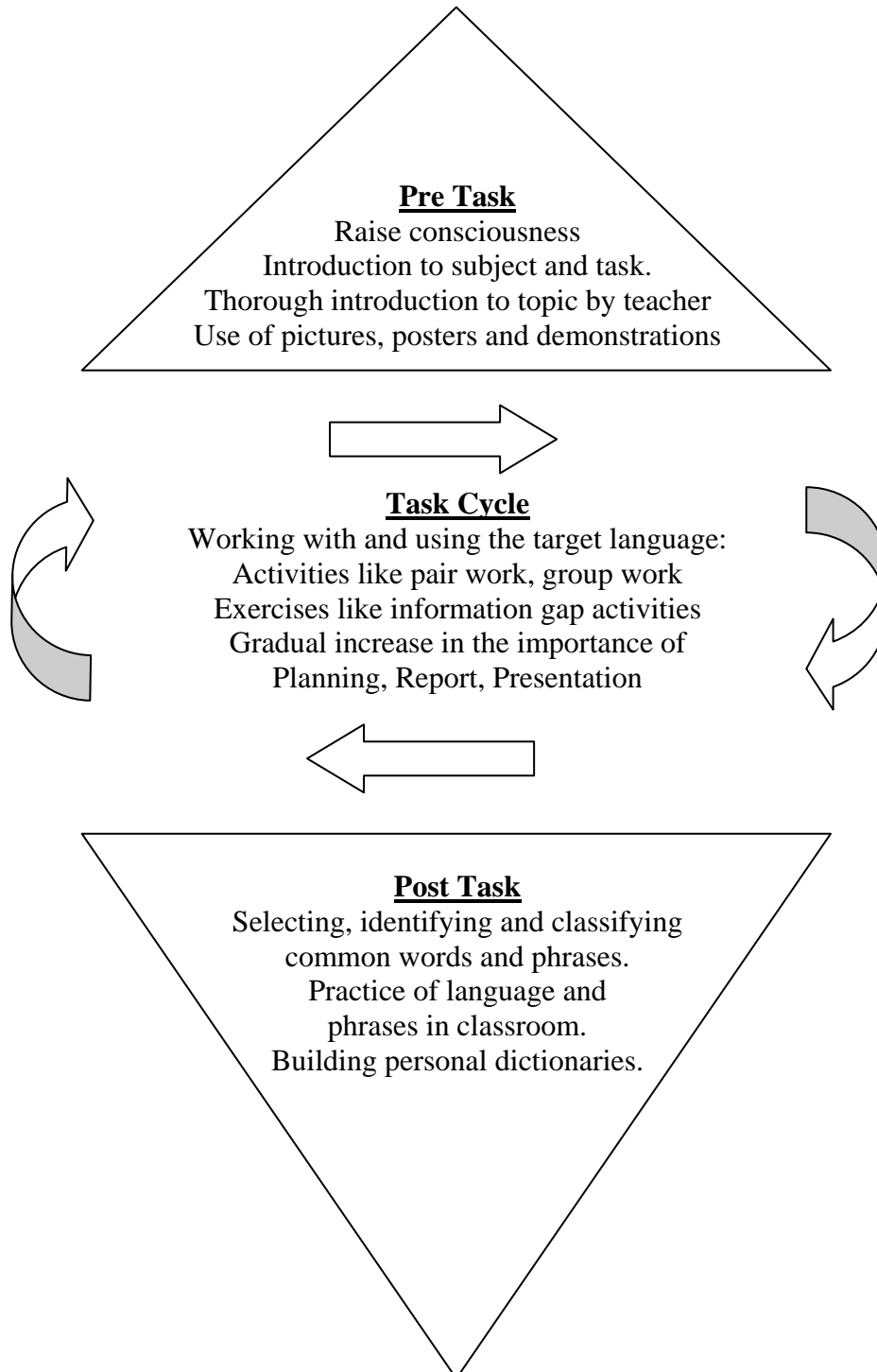- allows for form-focussed instruction

So we should select topics that will motivate learners, engage their attention and promote their language development as efficiently as possible.

WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OF TBL

1. Task based learning is useful for moving the focus of the learning process from the teacher to the student.

2. It gives the student a different way of understanding language as a tool instead of as a specific goal.

3. It can take teaching from abstract knowledge to real world application.

4. A Task is helpful in meeting the immediate needs of the learners and provides a framework for creating classes that are interesting and that can address student needs.

THE STRUCTURAL FRAMEWORK OF TBL

The diagram below can be used to portray the TBL cycle:

Pre Task
Raise consciousness
Introduction to subject and task.
Thorough introduction to topic by teacher
Use of pictures, posters and demonstrations

Task Cycle
Working with and using the target language:
Activities like pair work, group work
Exercises like information gap activities
Gradual increase in the importance of
Planning, Report, Presentation

Post Task
Selecting, identifying and classifying
common words and phrases.
Practice of language and
phrases in classroom.
Building personal dictionaries.

Let us briefly describe the different phases:

The *pre-task phase* introduces the class to the topic and the task, activating topic-related words and phrases.

The *task cycle* offers learners the chance to use whatever language they already know in order to carry out the task, and then to improve the language, under teacher guidance, while planning their reports of the task. In the *task stage* the students complete the task in pairs and the teacher listens to the dialogues. Then the teacher helps to correct the completed tasks in oral or written form. One of the pairs performs their dialogue in front of the class and once the task has been completed the students will hear the native speaking teachers repeat the same dialogue so they can compare it with their own.

The *last phase* in the framework, language focus, allows a closer study of some of the specific features occurring in the language used during the task cycle.

The teaching techniques required for task-based learning are not very different from those of ordinary language teaching. The differences lie in the ordering and weighting of activities and in the fact that there is a greater amount of student activity, and less direct, up-from teaching.

ISSUES CONCERNING TASK BASED LEARNING

It is important to be aware of some pitfalls concerning the use of task based learning. Since it encourages students to use their own language and vocabulary, it is necessary for the teacher to help students expand these. Otherwise students will not learn new phrases or words by themselves, but only increase skills in using the language they already possesses.

This can also be solved by having students change who they work with, so that stronger students can work with students who are at a lower level. In this case, the stronger student should be told to focus on using more advanced words and phrases. This does not help the stronger students though, for that they will need the aid of the teacher.

Another very important thing to remember is that even after the task cycle has been completed, the learning process has not. The evaluation part is critical for students to become selfaware of the learning they have just gone through. Put crudely, there are two equally-important parts in the learning process of task based learning. The first is to do the work and go through the tasks and the second is to get the student to think about what it is they have just gone through. If you, the teacher, do not follow up in the post task, half of the task based learning process is wasted.

TBL ACTIVITIES - EXAMPLES

Good advice:

- Use the foreign language as much as possible.
- Use only mother tongue when necessary for explanation of exercises.
- The pre-task is meant to help create a good atmosphere for learning without anxiety. Give words and supporting sentences for students to use.
- The pre-task must supply words, phrases, ideas to support the individual student in the main task
- Remember that a pre-task can be any of the following:

  - audio text
  - a video clip
  - a brainstorming activity
  - a short exercise (cloze, crossword etc.)
  - photos (what do you see?)
  - webpage (what do you see?)

  - *Anything that will promote the foreign language and set the minds of the students into a certain context and atmosphere*

- The main task must facilitate a process where students can activate and use their own strategies.
- Teacher role in the main task: monitoring the processes of the students working with the main task.
- Remember the importance of the last step, the **consciousness raising activities**:

  - Students repeat their process and their work with the main task – must be performed in class – the process will make students realize that language is diverse and that many different structures and words give meaning and can be used for communication
  - The teacher *must* pick up on and draw attention to relevant grammatical and semantic points in this last phase of the TBL-cycle

Beginner's level - English for special purposes – technical English

Tools: "What's this device?"

Pre-task

Ask students to give names of tools. Write them on the blackboard. Add also standard sentences such as "this is a hammer", "this is a spanner" etc.

Bring a tool box and show real tools to the students. Say or make students say "This is a hammer" and so on.

If you can, show a short instruction video, where some typical tools are used and where the language is not too difficult. Let students add new names to the tools on the blackboard.

Prepare a memory game with selected tools (10-15). The memory game must consist of pictures and written names of tools.

Split the class into groups of 3-4 students and let two groups play against each other in the memory game. Do not play the game with only two students in the game. This may create a lot of fear and anxiety for the individual student who cannot remember all the tools and will do the contrary of what is intended with the pre-task – namely to create a comfortable and safe learning environment.

Ruler		Hammer	
Screwdriver		Saw	
Pliers		Tester	
Jack		Drill	

Follow the memory game with a "What's this device?" exercise for the whole group. This exercise should be conducted by the teacher.

Let the students see one sentence at a time. They should read and understand each sentence. Let one student read a sentence out aloud, and let others help in the translation, so that this becomes a joint exercise.

When all the sentences have been shown, the students can hopefully guess the name of the device/tool.

What' this device?

1. This device is longer than it is wide.

2. This device can be held in your hand.

3. This device is made of wood and metal.

4. This device can have many different sizes.

5. This device is used to put other things in place.

6. You have to use energy for this device.

7. You have to lift your arm and make it fall to use this device.

8. You need this device to hang something on the wall.

9. You use this device to hammer on things.

Try to guess the name of this device.

Main Task

The students should now be split into groups of two-three people. Each group must now produce their own "What's this device" exercise. They have to choose a tool from the memory game.

The teacher should leave help-sentences and phrases on the blackboard for students to use if they need to.

The teacher monitors the process of the production in the different groups and helps only when it is really needed.

The student exercise should be written down, so that it can be used as either an oral exercise or a reading exercise.

When all the groups have finished an exercise and are satisfied with the result, they must test the exercise with the other groups.

Language consciousness activities

When the groups have tried out their exercises several times with different groups, the teacher must ask for the attention of the class again and take over the process.

The teacher must now point to a group and ask them to repeat their exercise and write each sentence on the board. The aim is to give full attention to the language production of this particular group, to look at the sentences, the choice of words and the grammatical structures.

At this point the teacher can pick out good examples from the student production and, at the same time, can open up for specific grammatical points. Other groups can add suggestions and ask questions.

This is also the time and place for the teacher to draw attention to some things that have been monitored by the teacher during the group work.

This activity should be repeated and at least two or three groups should be asked to present their exercises.

In this way, teaching grammar becomes a lively and relevant activity for the students, because they have all produced and taken part in the examples that are used for explaining grammatical rules.

Intermediate level – working with texts

You can easily use the TBL method for working with texts at an intermediate level. All you have to do is to be creative and to simply think of a way to turn text reading into a task for the students. Have ready a pair of scissors, glue, photos maybe and an open and creative mind.

Pre-task
- audio text
- a video clip
- a brainstorming activity
- a short exercise (cloze, crossword etc.)
- photos (what do you see?)
- webpage (what do you see?)
- matching exercise with new and difficult vocabulary from the text

The most important thing in the pre-task is to focus on the preparation for the main task and to prepare the students for learning new vocabulary, new phrases, new contexts and areas of investigation. The pre-task should always make students feel ready and comfortable before working with the main task and, when working with texts, it is always important to include the main theme of the text and new vocabulary from the text in the phase of the pre-task.

Main Task

Non fiction:

Split the text into different sections and give the sections numbers. The sections must be divided according to the content.

You must hand out the text to the students with the marked sections and numbers.

You must also hand out another piece of paper with a specific format, like the one below.

You must read the text and fill in the form. Look at the sections in the text and write down the most important information from each section in the first column.

Write down your own experience, opinion, knowledge about the information you find in the text in the second column.

The text	Your own opinion/experience/ knowledge

You can let the students work together or alone when they read and fill in the form. When everybody has finished with the text and the form, students should be given time to tell each other what they have chosen to write down in their forms.

The motivating element here is that students choose what to write on their forms and that each student has to justify her/his choice when talking about the text in class.

When students tell each other what they have chosen to put in the form, they are also given time to work with difficult words and phrases from the text. Here they can ask each other about meanings without being exposed to the attention of the whole class and they can ask the teacher about words and phrases that they did not understand fully in the reading process.

The teacher can walk around the class room and monitor the students reading and filling in the form and the teacher can listen to the students when they talk about they own work with the text. This phase gives the teacher the opportunity to listen for good examples, but more importantly, to pick up on problems and misunderstandings related to the text and the specific language.

Language consciousness activities

You can choose to let different students write their own results from their forms on the board. *It should never be only one student alone at the board*. It must always be more than one student who delivers the examples for the consciousness raising activities. Remember that it is always motivating to see for yourself what other students have come up with – especially when you have chosen your own answers for specific reasons and put effort into it. You must use that feeling as a motivation factor in your classes.

You can also choose to do the same activity as an oral activity, where you ask students to read what they have written down on their forms. You must then write some relevant examples yourself on the board.

It is important to pick up the relevant grammatical points in this phase of the TBL cycle. This is a crucial moment for documenting the necessity of extra work with specific grammatical elements for students at this level. And you have the full attention of the students, because they have produced the examples that you work on together in class for language consciousness raising activities.

Fiction – short stories:

When you work with fiction, and if a text has a straightforward plot, it is easy for you as a teacher to cut up the text and turn the text reading process itself into a common task conducted by a group of students.

The following example is meant to be a **main task**, but can be expanded with a task like the one described about, using a form for students to fill in. Obviously, the following example should not stand alone, but should be included into a full TBL-cycle, like the one described above.

- Divide the text into small sections – logical in relation to the story plot.

- Take a pair of scissors and cut up the text into the sections you have chosen. There should not be more than 4-6 sections.

- Mark each section with a letter or number.

- Divide the class into groups that match the number of sections.

- Lay the pieces of text (the different cut up sections) on the table, text down, in front of each group and let each student in a group pick up one of the pieces.

- Ask the students to read their own piece of text by themselves.

- When all the students in a group have read their own piece of text, they must tell the rest of the group what the text says.

- Everybody in a group must tell about his/her piece of text.

- The group must now try to put the story into the right sequence.

Short story   Adjectives/descriptive language

Main character	
Other characters	
Setting 1	
Setting 2	
Problems/Themes	