# Task-based learning

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Many newly qualified or less experienced teachers tend to base their lesson planning on the traditional PPP approach (Presentation, Practice, Production ) because it is reliable and it is a valid framework around which to base a series of classroom activities.

It is also usually the best way of covering all the lexical areas and grammar points in the course book or syllabus. The problem is that PPP serves the teacher’s needs but it is debatable whether or not it fulfills the needs of the learner.

The language presented and practiced does not take into account the particular needs of each learner; the language content is almost always dictated by the coursebook and/or syllabus. For this reason, many teachers, having experimented with the PPP approach turn to more learner-centred approaches where the needs of the learner are central to the lesson content. One of such approaches is TBL (Task-Based Learning)

**What is TBL?**

The concept of TBL grew out of an observation that students could learn language more effectively if the language was presented in the context of everyday, practical, and interesting tasks. TBLL grew out of communicative language teaching, and is considered a subcategory of it.

In task-based learning, the central focus of the lesson is the task itself, not a grammar point or a lexical area, and the objective is not to ‘learn the structure’ but to ‘complete the task’. Of course, to complete the task successfully students have to use the right language and communicate their ideas. The language, therefore becomes an instrument of communication, whose purpose is to help complete the task successfully. The students can use any language they need to reach their objective. Usually there is no ‘correct answer’ for a task outcome. Students decide on their own way of completing it, using the language they see will fit.

**Tasks can be** as simple as putting a list of animals in order from fastest to slowest and then trying to agree with a partner on the correct order. . Examples of such tasks could be going to see a doctor at a clinic or a hospital, conducting an interview, shopping at a supermarket, mailing a letter at the post office, checking in to a hotel, or boarding an aircraft at the airport. Or it could be something more complicated like a survey to find out which parts of town your classmates live in and how they get to school, ending in visual information presented in the form of pie charts and maps. Or it could be something really complicated like a role-play involving a meeting in the Town Hall of the different people affected by a new shopping centre development and the consequent demolition of a youth centre and old people’s home. Whatever the task, it should always have some kind of completion; and this completion should be central to the class - the language resulting naturally from the task and not the other way round.

Different teachers use TBL in different ways. Some integrate it into the existing syllabus, some use it to replace the syllabus altogether, some use it as an ‘extra’ to their traditional classroom activities. But generally, teachers using a TBL approach divide their task-based classes into **three stages** (the task structure proposed by Willis and Willis):

**Stage 1: The pre-task.** The teacher introduces the topic and familiarizes students with situations/lexical areas/simple texts (reading and listening)). This draws the students into the topic and brings up language that may be useful. The teacher then explains what the task is and sets up the activity.  
 **Stage 2:** **The task cycle: Task > Planning > Report .**Students perform the task in pairs or groups, the students plan the task, gather the language and information to do it .They may then present their findings/conclusions to the rest of the class. In this stage, mistakes are not important; the teacher provides support and monitors. The learners focus on communication, perhaps at the expense of accuracy, but this will be dealt with in the next stage.

(During the monitoring stage, most teachers make notes of common errors and students’ particular learning needs).

**Stage 3: Language Focus and Feedback.** The final stage is the language focus stage, during which specific language features from the task which come up in stage 2 are highlighted and worked on.. Students reflect on the language needed to complete the task and how well they did. This is their opportunity to concentrate on accuracy and make sure they resolve any doubts or problems they had. Feedback on the learners’ performance at the reporting stage may also be appropriate at this point.  
  
 **The main advantage of TBL** over more traditional methods is that it allows students to focus on real communication before doing any serious language analysis. It focuses on students’ needs by putting them into authentic communicative situations and allowing them to use all their language resources to deal with them. This draws the learners’ attention to what they know how to do, what they don’t know how to do, and what they only half know. It makes learners aware of their needs and encourages them to take (some of the) responsibility for their own learning. TBL is good for mixed ability classes; a task can be completed successfully by a weaker or stronger student with more or less accuracy in language production. The important thing is that both learners have had the same communicative experience and are now aware of their own individual learning needs.

Another advantage of this approach is that learners are exposed to a wide variety of language and not just grammar. Collocations, lexical phrases and expressions, chunks of language, things that often escape the constraints of the traditional syllabus come up naturally in task-based lessons. . Although the teacher may present language in the pre-task, students have free rein to experiment with whatever grammar constructs and vocabulary they wish. This enables students to employ the language they already know as well as the new language being taught in that lesson, instead of only using just the ‘target language’ of the particular lesson. But this can also be a disadvantage.

**One of the disadvantages** of TBL is its randomness. It doesn’t often fit in with the course book/syllabus, which tends to present language in neat packages. Some teachers (and learners) also find the move away from an explicit language focus difficult. Many teachers  also agree that it is not the best method to use with beginners, since they have very few language resources to draw on to be able to complete meaningful tasks successfully.Lack of appropriate resources such as time, place, technology tools, supplementary materials for TBL should be taken into account while designing task-based lessons.

Whereas the aim of the PPP model is to lead from accuracy to fluency, the aim of TBL is to integrate all four skills and to move from fluency to accuracy plus fluency. The range of tasks available (reading texts, listening texts, problem-solving, role-plays, questionnaires, etc) offers a great deal of flexibility in this model and should lead to more motivating activities for the learners.

Task-based learning offers a change from the grammar practice routines through which many learners have previously failed to learn to communicate. It encourages learners to experiment with whatever English they can recall, to try things out without fear of failure and public correction, and to take active control of their own learning, both in and outside class. For the teacher, it may be true that the task-based language teaching is an adventure. But, it is also an effective language instruction that is worth trying.

Example Task - Getting to know your teachers

**Level:** Pre-intermediate and above

Students may need at least a week to do this activity, depending on the availability of the teachers in your centre

**Stage one - Pre-task activity:** In pairs students talk about an English teacher they have had.

* What was her name?
* Where was she from?
* How old was she?
* Do you remember any of her lessons?
* What was your favourite activity in her class?

Students write the questions for the questionnaire they are going to use to interview the teachers.

**Stage two -Task performance**

To set up the activity students then interview you and record the information.Depending on which teachers are free at this time they can then go and interview other teachers and record the information. You may wish to bring other teachers into your class to be interviewed or alternatively give your students a week or so to complete the task, interviewing teachers before or after class, or whenever they come to the centre.

Working with a different partner students compare their answers and experiences then decide on their final answers on the superlative questions.  
**Stage three - Feedback and reflection.**

Allow time for students to express their opinions and experiences of the activity. Provide any feedback you feel is necessary.

On-line recourses:

[http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk](http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/tbl-pbl-two-learner-centred-approaches)

## [http://en.wikiversity.org](http://en.wikiversity.org/wiki/Learning_theories_in_practice/Task-Based_Learning)

## <http://www.onestopenglish.com>

<http://www.italki.com>