

TASK-BASED APPROACH TO FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

At present the Ukrainian authorities set as their primary task for developing the independent Ukraine its integration into the world community. This is impossible without having many people with a good command of foreign languages, and especially English. The growing need for good communication skills in English has created a huge demand for an appropriate teaching methodology. The methodology known as communicative language teaching, or CLT, is considered the best in meeting present day requirements for foreign language teaching. CLT was first proposed in the 1970s and since that time it has served as a major source of influence on language teaching practice around the world. Many of the issues raised by a communicative teaching methodology are still relevant today.

One of the subcategories of CLT is task-based language learning (TBLL). Task-based language learning was popularized by N. Prabhu while working in Bangalore, India. Major scholars who have done research in this area include Teresa P. Pica, Michael Long, Jane Willis, David Nunan.

Task-based language learning (TBLL), also known as **task-based language teaching** (TBLT) or **task-based instruction** (TBI) focuses on the use of authentic language and on asking students to do meaningful tasks using the target language [4].

The concept of 'task' has become an important element in syllabus design, classroom teaching and learner assessment. According to Rod Ellis, a task has four main characteristics:

1. A task involves a primary focus on (pragmatic) meaning.
2. A task has some kind of 'gap' (Prabhu identified the three main types as information gap, reasoning gap, and opinion gap).
3. The participants choose the linguistic resources needed to complete the task.
4. A task has a clearly defined, non-linguistic outcome [1, 37].

Many types of language tasks exist, particularly in the realm of communicative instruction.

According to N. S. Prabhu, there are three main categories of task; information-gap, reasoning-gap, and opinion-gap.

Information-gap activity, which involves a transfer of given information from one person to another – or from one form to another, or from one place to another – generally calling for the decoding or encoding of information from or into language. One example is pair work in which each member of the pair has a part of the total information (for example an incomplete picture) and attempts to convey it verbally to the other. Another example is completing a tabular representation with information available in a given piece of text. The activity often involves selection of relevant information as well, and learners may have to meet criteria of completeness and correctness in making the transfer.

Reasoning gap activity, which involves deriving some new information from given information through processes of inference, deduction, practical reasoning, or a perception of relationships or patterns. One example is working out a teacher's timetable on the basis of given class timetables. Another is deciding what course of action is best (for example cheapest or quickest) for a given purpose and within given constraints. The activity necessarily involves comprehending and conveying information, as in information-gap activity, but the information to be conveyed is not identical with that initially comprehended. There is a piece of reasoning which connects the two.

Opinion gap activity, which involves identifying and articulating a personal preference, feeling, or attitude in response to a given situation. One example is story completion; another is taking part in the discussion of a social issue. The activity may involve using factual information and formulating arguments to justify one's opinion, but there is no objective procedure for demonstrating outcomes as right or wrong, and no reason to expect the same outcome from different individuals or on different occasions [3, 46 – 47].

Jane Willis proposes six types of tasks as the basis for TBLL:

1. **Listing tasks:** For example, students might have to make up a list of things they would pack if they were going on a beach vacation.
2. **Sorting and ordering:** Students work in pairs and make up a list of the most important characteristics of an ideal vacation.
3. **Comparing:** Students compare ads for two different supermarkets.
4. **Problem-solving:** Students read a letter to an advice columnist and suggest a solution to the writer's problems.
5. **Sharing personal experience:** Students discuss their reactions to an ethical or moral dilemma.
6. **Creative tasks:** Students prepare plans for redecorating a house [5, 35 – 36].

In addition, task types include **narrative** (Foster & Skehan, 1996); **reasoning-gap** (Nunan, 1989); **question-and-answer** (Nunan 1989); **structured and semi-structured dialogues** (Nunan, 1989); and **role-plays** and **simulations** (Crookall & Oxford, 1990; Richards & Rodgers, 2001); picture stories (Nunan, 1989); **puzzles** and **games** (Nunan, 1989); **interviews, discussions, and debates** (Nunan, 1989; Oxford, 1990; Richards & Rodgers, 2001); and everyday functions, such as **telephone conversations** and **service encounters** (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

Many task types involve multiple skills and subskills, such as reading a passage for comprehension and then doing something with the information that has been read, such as answering questions, discussing the information, making a decision, solving a problem, and expressing how one feels about a given situation.

David Nunan draws a basic distinction between real-world or target tasks, and pedagogical tasks [2, 18 – 21].

Pedagogical tasks are specially designed classroom tasks that are intended to require the use of specific intractional strategies and may also require the use of specific types of language (skills, grammar, vocabulary). A task in which two learners have to try to find the number of differences between two similar pictures is an example of a pedagogical task. The task itself is not something one would normally encounter in the real world. However the interactional processes it requires provides useful input to language development.

Real-world tasks are tasks that reflect real-world uses of language and which might be considered a rehearsal for real-world tasks. A role play in which students practice a job interview would be a task of this kind.

Pedagogically, **task-based language learning** has strengthened the following **principles**:

- A needs-based approach to content selection.
- An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language.
- The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation.
- The provision of opportunities for learners to focus not only on language but also on the learning process itself.
- An enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning.
- The linking of classroom language learning with language use outside the classroom [2, 18].

Task-based language learning offers an alternative for language teachers. In a task-based lesson the teacher doesn't pre-determine what language will be studied, the lesson is based around the completion of a central task and the language studied is determined by what happens as the students complete it. The lesson follows certain stage:

- **Pre-task:** The teacher introduces the topic and gives the students clear instructions on what they will have to do at the task stage and might help the students to recall some language that may be useful for the task. The pre-task stage can also often include playing a recording of people doing the task. This gives the students a clear model of what will be expected of them. The students can take notes and spend time preparing for the task.
- **Task:** The students complete a task in pairs or groups using the language resources that they have as the teacher monitors and offers encouragement.
- **Planning:** Students prepare a short oral or written report to tell the class what happened during their task. They then practise what they are going to say in their groups. Meanwhile the teacher is available for the students to ask for advice to clear up any language questions they may have.
- **Report:** Students then report back to the class orally or read the written report. The teacher chooses the order of when students will present their reports and may give the students some quick feedback on the content. At this stage the teacher may also play a recording of others doing the same task for the students to compare.
- **Analysis:** The teacher then highlights relevant parts from the text of the recording for the students to analyse. They may ask students to notice interesting features within this text. The teacher can also highlight the language that the students used during the report phase for analysis.
- **Practice:** Finally, the teacher selects language areas to practise based upon the needs of the students and what emerged from the task and report phases. The students then do practice activities to increase their confidence and make a note of useful language.

Below is an example of a task-based lesson plan adapted from A Framework for Task-Based Learning by Jane Willis. This is an English class in Taiwan where English is a foreign language. There are thirty students who are sixth graders, high beginners, in the classroom. Seven students are high-level students who went to cram school to learn English for six years or more. Five students are low-level students who have difficulty in recognizing and reading most of words or sentences they have learned. Their English teacher, Connie, is going to give them some tasks to practice the four language skills, especially speaking, and learn some specific sentence patterns or phrases that can be used when they want to compare or contrast things. Her lesson plan is as follows:

Task Goal (Outcome):

Students are able to use English to describe objects, actions, and signs as well as exchange information. Furthermore, they will complete the task “Spot the differences”, which asks the students to find out seven differences between two pictures (Picture B and Picture B’).

Pre-task:

1. Show a picture on the board and have the class discuss what is in the picture. Students might try to recall and use sentence patterns as many as they can to help describe objects, actions, and signs in the picture.
2. Divide students into groups of four. Give each group two similar pictures (Picture A and Picture A’) but with seven differences. Have each group discuss and find out all differences. Remind them that this activity is like one they have done before only with different pictures. Each student will see both pictures. Together they have to find the differences and write them down in note form. (Put an example (cat on right or on left of sign) on the board or the teacher models how to describe the pictures.) They will only have one minute. They should talk in English, but quietly.
3. Bring class together and have each group report their findings to the teacher and the class.
4. Introduce task: “Spot the differences” puzzle, like the one they have just completed. The difference is that each student cannot see both pictures. They need to try their best to use English to describe details in their own picture.

During-task:

1. Get students to stand up, find a different partner and sit down with their new pairs. Give each group two new pictures (Picture B and Picture B’). Keep them covered up for now. They also need two sheets of paper between the two of them, pens or pencils and their language notebooks.
2. Get them ready to start: We are going to work in pairs. Now, each of you takes one picture and notice that you are not allowed to see the picture until the task starts. Find seven differences between your picture and your partner’s picture. You are not allowed to show the pictures to each other. You are only allowed to communicate by talking about the pictures. You may use a sheet of paper and a pen to plan what you are going to say before you start describing your picture.
3. Tell all pairs to choose four differences they think will be in the two pictures. They write them down in detail, and practice explaining them, so they can tell their partners and the whole class later on. Show the students some examples, such as the cat example, on the board.
4. Go around the room and help the students while noting useful phrases and writing some on the left of the board, e.g. In picture B...the sign says....

5. When time is up, have students stop discussing and be ready to report their answers. Give them two minutes to practice. Draw attention to phrases on board.
6. Explain that they must listen carefully to other pairs. If they have the same difference, they check it off. Once they hear a difference, they must not report it themselves.
7. Each pair gives one difference (write these on the board as they tell the class) till there are seven. Some pairs may give the wrong answer or still have more. Write them on the board too.
8. Have students find out the correct differences by checking out each other's picture.
9. Then, play audio recording of David and Amy doing the same task. There are one or two factual inaccuracies in the recording. Have students check off the differences they hear. (May need to pause after each one, and play it again.)

Here is a sample dialogue from such an activity:

David: Do you have the number of the house?

Amy: Yes, it is thirty. How about yours?

David: Mine is thirteen.

Amy: uh... thirteen, Oh, okay. How many people on the street in your picture.

David: Well, I got two, and you?

Amy: I have two, too. Mm...I think this part is the same.

David: How about trees? How many trees do you have? Are they tall or short?

Amy: I have one tree and it's tall.

David: Oh, I have two trees and they're tall. That's another difference here.

Amy: What else?

David: I think maybe the number's different.

Amy: What number?

David: The phone number of the restaurant.

Amy: My number is six three one nine zero. Your phone number is...

David: It's six three three nine zero.

Amy: Okay. How many have we got? That's three.

David: Three. How many do we have to have? Seven. Mm.

Amy: How about the television- is that on in your picture? Mine is not on.

David: Yes, it is!

Amy: ...and it's on in your picture but off in my picture.

David: Right. Anything else? The woman in the restaurant is waving the waiter.

Amy: I guess that is the same in my picture. What about the man on the street? He's carrying an umbrella.

David: He isn't carrying anything in my picture.

Amy: All right! So what shall we put? The man...

10. Now ask the class if any pairs have more differences? Ask them to spot the inaccuracies in the recording.

11. The teacher plays the audio recording in which contains one or two inaccuracies.

Post-task :

1. From the board, students choose a useful phrase from each sentence and practice saying it. Delete the phrase immediately after it has been said. Delete other words gradually. This is called "progressive deletion" and should be fun!

2. Students read out all sentences in full, including the missing parts. Clean board.

3. From transcript, students hear recording again and follow it in the transcript. Pause tape sometimes to let them predict how next phrase will be said (intonation with stress on key words).

4. Students read whole transcript and find ten questions to classify in whatever ways they like (e.g. questions with shall or get; short questions/long questions; questions with/without verb, etc.)

5. Students find two examples of the word and tell where it is in the conversation.

6. If time permits, students write down any new phrases they noticed.

7. Bring the class together and review analysis of questions. Practice short questions (point out many are without verbs) and then list questions with shall, got, have and practice them. Also, discuss use of so, and ask what word(s) are also used for the same function.

8. After the task, give students a reflection form with several questions on it. (e.g., What is the most difficult part in the "spot the differences" task? What are some interesting things you see in the task? What did you do if your partner couldn't understand what you described?)

9. Peer and teacher feedback on task performance.

10. Optional activity: Have students imitate the “spot the differences” activity. They could draw two similar pictures to create a task to quiz their partners.

11. Create a task to quiz their partners [5, 156 – 158].

As a matter of **conclusion** it's necessary to highlight the advantages of TBLL. The main of them are the following: task based learning is useful for moving the focus of the learning process from the teacher to the student; it gives the student a different way of understanding language as a tool instead of as a specific goal; it can bring teaching from abstract knowledge to real world application; a task is helpful in meeting the immediate needs of the learners and provides a framework for creating classes, interesting and able to address to the students needs.

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РЕЗЮМЕ

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ПОДХОД К ОБУЧЕНИЮ ИНОСТРАННОГО ЯЗЫКА, БАЗИРУЕМЫЙ НА ВЫПОЛНЕНИИ КОММУНИКАТИВНЫХ ЗАДАНИЙ

Статья посвящена рассмотрению подхода к обучению иностранного языка, который базируется на выполнении коммуникативных заданий. Рассмотрены основные виды заданий, охарактеризованы этапы их выполнения учащимися, подан фрагмент урока с использованием описаного подхода.

Ключевые слова: коммуникативное задание, подход к обучению иностранного языка, который базируется на выполнении заданий, коммуникативный подход.

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TASK-BASED APPROACH TO FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

The article is devoted to the discription of task-based approach to foreign language teaching and learning. It analyses different types of communicative tasks, describes the main stages of a task-based lesson plan, includes a practical example of it.

Key words: communicative language teaching, communicative task, task-based approach to language learning.