Task Based Learning

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1. Background essay

1.1 Introduction

I have been interested in task based learning since I first came across it in my initial training. Towards the end of the course, which had proposed PPP as a basic approach to teaching a lesson, one of our trainers introduced task based learning as a methodology which she was enthusiastic about. My understanding then was that while she considered it a superior approach to PPP, task based learning wasn't necessarily the easiest teaching method for new recruits to begin their teaching career with. However, my curiosity was aroused. While I am aware that I have taught task based lessons thanks to my use of the Cutting Edge series, I have always wanted the opportunity to study task based learning and the rationale behind it more closely.
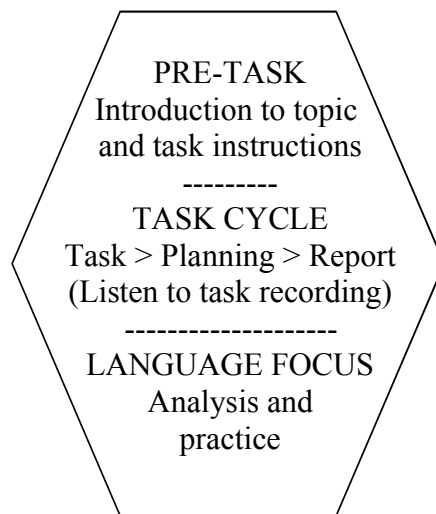
1.2 Task based learning

Historically, task based learning seems to have gained currency since the 1996 publication of Jane Willis's **A Framework for Task-Based Learning** (Longman) and her paper *A flexible framework for task-based learning*, published in Willis J. & Willis D. (ed) **Challenge and Change in Language Teaching** (Macmillan Heinemann).

In the latter, Willis acknowledges that she began to experiment with task based learning in the early 1980s. She was frustrated by the limitations of the PPP model and was encouraged by the success of Prabhu's Communicational Teaching Project in Bangalore. She also felt supported by research findings in the field of second language acquisition such as those referred to by Peter Skehan in the same volume.

In his paper, *Second language acquisition and task based instruction,* Skehan asserts that PPP is ultimately inadequate yet resistant to change because it is convenient and comfortable for teachers. He writes that up to the mid 1980s, SLA research demonstrated that a PPP approach was misguided, but did not propose an alternative until it was found that the kind of classroom activity which promoted learning most rapidly and efficiently was meaning based. Tasks are defined by Skehan as activities which have meaning as their primary focus. He summarises the contrast between PPP and task based learning: "A PPP approach looks on the learning process as learning a series of discrete items and then bringing these items together in communication to provide further practice and consolidation. A task based approach sees the learning process as one of learning through doing – it is by primarily engaging in meaning that the learner's system is encouraged to develop" (Skehan 1996 p21).

Jane Willis summarises the difference between PPP and task based learning: "the focus on language form comes at the end" (Willis 1996 p52).
The task based lesson, based on her framework, is structured as follows:

```
          ┌─────────────────────┐
         /  PRE-TASK             \
        /   Introduction to topic \
       /    and task instructions  \
      │         ---------          │
      │      TASK CYCLE            │
      │   Task > Planning > Report │
      │   (Listen to task recording)│
      │     --------------------   │
       \    LANGUAGE FOCUS        /
        \   Analysis and         /
         \  practice            /
          └───────────────────┘
```

The aim of the task based learning framework is to create the optimum conditions for language learning. Willis (1998, p3) identifies these three essential conditions as:

- Exposure to the target language
- Opportunities to use the target language for expressing meaning
- Motivation to engage with exposure and use what they know.

A fourth desirable condition is:

- Focus on language form to prevent fossilisation

A Brief description of the task based lesson

Pre-task
This serves as an introduction to the topic and task. It may involve brainstorming, a pre-task, introduction of useful words and phrases, preparation time or listening to native speakers doing the task. New structures are not pre-taught.

The Task Cycle
This cycle has three essential phases and one further optional phase.

a. Task
Learners begin by carrying out a communication task, using whatever language they already have, in pairs or groups. A task is a goal-oriented activity in which learners achieve a real outcome. According to Willis, (1996, pp 26-28), there are six main types of task:

1. Listing
2. Ordering and sorting
3. Comparing
4. Problem solving
5. Sharing personal experiences
6. Creative tasks

Grammar exercises, practice activities are examples of activities which are not tasks. Tasks have a specific objective that must be achieved in a given time. Learners are free to choose whatever language forms they like to achieve the goal of the task. The emphasis is on meaning rather than form. The teacher monitors discreetly and does not correct errors.

Closed tasks are highly structured with specific goals and relatively predictable language forms. Open tasks are less structured with less specific goals and less predictable language forms.

At this stage, the teacher monitors and encourages attempts to communicate meaning in the target language. While helping students to formulate what they want to say, the teacher does not correct errors. The emphasis is on spontaneity and fluency.

b. Planning
Having completed the task, students prepare to report on the outcome. Now the emphasis is on organisation and accuracy. The teacher advises students on language and helps them correct any errors they make during this phase.

c. Report
Some or all of the groups report briefly to the whole class. The others listen in order compare findings or conduct a survey. The teacher may rephrase but not correct the language.

d. Optional post task listening
This phase allows students to listen to native speakers do the same task and to compare the language.
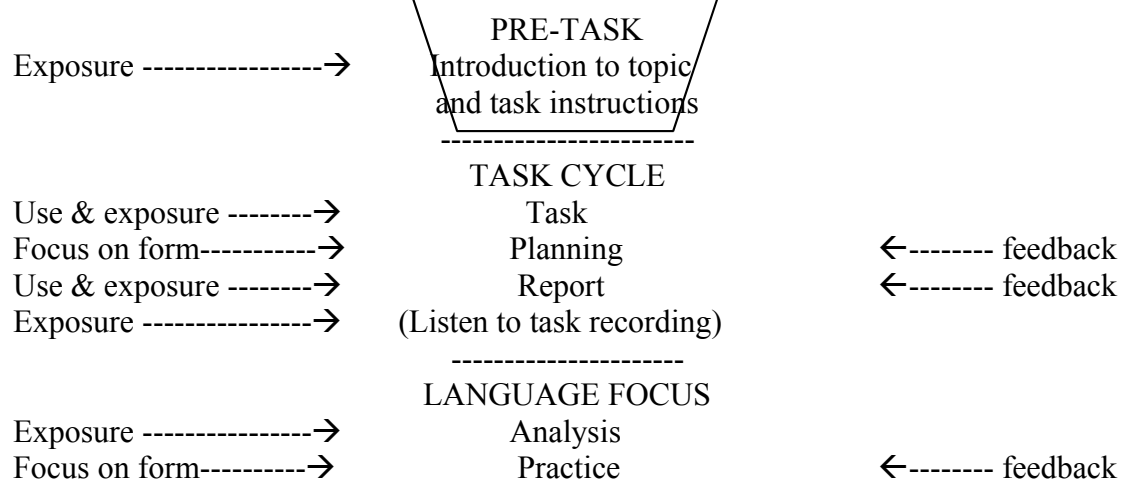
Language Focus

Analysis
Learners focus on form and ask questions about language features.

Practice
Teacher conducts activities based on the analysis work or examples from the text or transcript.

The theory behind the TBL framework is that it is the methodology which most adequately fulfils the key conditions for language learning implied by SLA research findings. These conditions: exposure to real language, opportunities for real use of language, motivation and focus on language are provided for at each phase of the task based learning framework as illustrated by Willis (1996, p60):

```
                              PRE-TASK
Exposure ---------------→    Introduction to topic
                             and task instructions
                             -----------------------
                              TASK CYCLE
Use & exposure --------→          Task
Focus on form-----------→        Planning              ←-------- feedback
Use & exposure --------→          Report               ←-------- feedback
Exposure ----------------→   (Listen to task recording)
                             ----------------------
                             LANGUAGE FOCUS
Exposure ----------------→       Analysis
Focus on form----------→         Practice              ←-------- feedback
```

Willis (1996, p62) asserts that we can do without PPP altogether. She proposes that it
is essential however that both teachers and students understand the principles behind
the approach and the rationale behind each component of the framework. TBL has
been likened to "PPP upside down". Willis concludes that it might be better to think
of it as "PPP the right way up".

I can understand better why PPP would be seen as the better starting point for the
novice teacher. The TBL teacher faces complex challenges.
- The design of tasks and their sequencing in order to achieve balance between
  the goals of accuracy, complexity/restructuring and fluency
- Syllabus design: it is only with experience that a TBL teacher will be able to
  design tasks with a view to highlighting specific language areas.

1.3 Relevance to Learning Contexts

Task based learning is applicable in the widest variety of learning contexts as its
rationale, based on SLA research, is relevant no matter what the level, age, culture,
mother-tongue, motivation and previous learning experience of the students. Tasks
can vary in length and complexity according to the level of the class.

Tasks must be designed with the above factors taken into account. For example, a task
based lesson with a group of elementary teenagers in Turkey is likely to be very
different from a lesson with a multi-lingual group of advanced adults in Dublin.
However, there are opportunities to turn potential difficulties into opportunities. For
example, Willis (1996 p49) proposes that drawing up a set of guidelines for mother-
tongue use while doing tasks would make an excellent communicative task in itself.

My current upper-intermediate class consists of young adult learners from different
countries who express the desire to speak more. They are very willing to work in pairs
and small groups. They feel that their experience of learning English in their own
respective countries has been excessively grammar-centred. Although it is not always

the case, currently every member of this class is very comfortable learning in a broadly communicative way.

Although it seems that task based learning has been associated with an emphasis on fluency rather than accuracy, my reading would indicate that this is a rather unfair and inaccurate distortion of the methodology. My current class would benefit enormously from the planning and reporting phases of the task cycle which encourage the learners to pay attention to fluency AND accuracy.

Currently, I find that I am the one who dictates the structuring and sequencing of topics and I would be very interested see how I would cope with a lesson where the language produced is rather less predictable.

"TBL rests on the premise that learners learn through direct experience of language in use (exposure) and through language for themselves (use)." (Willis 1998, p6) To me, this seems universally applicable. In every learning context, it makes sense that learners should be helped to gain insights gradually rather than be expected to learn structures in a sequence and at a pace dictated by the teacher. I am interested to see if I can let go of this role and be a sower of seeds rather than a provider of bricks.

1.4 Objectives for the experiment

I am interested to see how a task based class moves from phase to phase. The class will be taped so that the language used by the students and my instructions can be reviewed.

a. To see how the learners react to a pure task based class. Will they find it interesting, enjoyable, engaging or otherwise.
b. To see whether I can predict the language the students will use in the task cycle. To see how I monitor the students.
c. To see if the learners' language becomes more accurate as the task cycle progresses. To see how I help the students with their accuracy
d. To see if the learners focus on form and ask questions about language features.

1.5 Evaluation of the experiment

a. My local tutor will observe the class. She will evaluate the reaction of the students to the class by noting the quality of their engagement with the task and with each other. I will give her observation tasks relating to the language the learners use during the task cycle. I will give the learners a questionnaire after the class, in order to ascertain how they felt about it and to gain some insight into their reaction to a task based lesson. They will be asked if they found the class interesting, if the class gave them the opportunity to improve their reading, writing, listening and speaking. I will also seek their opinion regarding the class's usefulness with reference to grammar, vocabulary and

pronunciation. Finally, they will be asked what they liked and disliked about the class.

b. I will ask my observer to note the clarity and quality of my instructions and the effect these may have on the success of the experiment. During the task phase of the task cycle, the observer will note if I do not interfere in their discussion, but rather leave them use whatever language they have to do the task.

c. Particular attention will be paid by the observer to any increase in accuracy as the students move from the task to the planning and reporting phases. She will note how my involvement in assisting the students during the planning stage can help them become more accurate with their language.

d. The observer will note what if any questions come from the learners regarding form. She will evaluate my answers to such questions.

Background essay word count: 1947

2. Lesson Plan

Date   13/10/04

Time	60 mins
Level	Upper-intermediate
Profile of learners	There are eight students in the class. All of them are attending a general English course (20 hours per week Monday-Friday) at Language Learning International, Dublin, Ireland. Two of them take additional group lessons in the afternoons as part of an intensive English programme.
	They come from different backgrounds and countries. There are three Italians, one Spaniard, one Brazilian, one Japanese and one Korean. Most of the students are in their 20s, but the youngest is 17 and the oldest is 35. Four are full time students in their respective countries and four have jobs such as dentist, graphic designer and engineer. Five of them are in Dublin for a three or four week course. The other three are here for several months.
	They are highly motivated learners. All of them want to improve their job prospects by improving every in aspect of English. They are particularly keen to increase their vocabulary and improve their spoken English. All of them are confident speakers. They enjoy pair and group work, classroom discussions and debates.
	There is a good atmosphere among the students. Accuracy is poor for some and in two cases, pronunciation is weak
Learners' needs	The learners need to be able to communicate fluently and accurately outside the classroom. They need to understand the language as it is spoken. Their classes provide them with the skills and confidence to use their language in everyday interactions.
Aims	By the end of the lesson, learners will have had the opportunity to complete the task of reading, discussing and summarising a newspaper article. They will have listened to a fluent speaker do a similar task. Having focused on and analysed his language, they will have been given the opportunity to practise the language in the Willis sense, and then go back into the task cycle and do a similar task.

Main focus: Discourse
Supporting skill: Reading

| Timetable Fit | I have been using Cutting Edge Upper Intermediate with this group. Having completed Unit 11, I have decided to adapt a portion of Unit 12 in the light of my reading on task based learning. I propose to continue with a closer analysis of the |

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	language of reporting and summarising what people say in the media.
Language Analysis	The newspaper articles from Cutting Edge Unit 12 (pp 143, 144, 145) give the students opportunities to report and summarise. When reporting what someone said, the verb form usually moves one tense into the past. When summarising what people said, there is a large number of verbs and a variety of constructions
Assumptions	I am assuming that the language in the articles will present few problems to the students
Anticipate problems and solutions	P: students will not find the task interesting S: stimulate interest during the pre-task stage P: students will get stuck during the first phase of the task S: tell them in advance that I'm not going to help them then P: the students won't have enough time S: be realistic about timing in the lesson plan
Materials/Resources	Cutting Edge Upper Intermediate (Cunningham and Moor, 1999, Longman)

Personal aims
- To teach a pure task based class
- To give students the time to complete the task without interference from me as this would be a new departure for me
- To see if I can cope with unpredicted questions on form
- To increase my understanding of how to teach a task based lesson

Detailed Plan

Stage	Aims	Procedure	Interaction	Time

Pre-task	To introduce the topic	Ask students to look at headlines and to guess what the articles are about	Whole class	0-5 mins
Task	Students read an article and answer three question	• Give each group an article. • Ask them to read it carefully. • Ask each other about any unfamiliar words. • Answer the following questions: a. What is the article about? b. What are the two most important claims made in the article? c. Think of one interesting question arising from the article that you would like to discuss with fellow students	Pairs. T monitors	5 – 15 mins
Planning	Students write out their answers	Ask students to summarise their answers in writing. They may ask T to help them express their answers	Pairs. T monitors and makes suggestions	15-25 mins
Report	Students read out their answers to the rest of the class	Each pair reports to the whole class. Other students listen an may ask questions	Whole class	25-28 mins
Listening	To hear a native speaker talk about a similar article	Ask students to listen carefully to a tape of a fluent speaker summarising a newspaper article. Play is once without transcript. Distribute transcript and play it again.	Whole class	28-32 mins
Analysis	To draw the students attention to aspects of the native speaker's language	Ask students to identify any words or phrases in the transcript which might be useful in summarising their own article. Answer questions about form	Pairs	32-40 mins
Practice T>P>R	To give students the opportunity to do the task again & incorporate new forms	Ask students to read another article. Answer the three questions using any new language they have learnt from the transcript	Pairs	40-60 mins

3. Post-Lesson

3.1 Evaluation of the experiment

a. I was pleased to see that the class reacted in a positive way to the experiment. My observer noted that the learners were actively engaged by the class. After the lesson, I asked them to complete the questionnaire (Appendix 1). The results of the questionnaire showed that they enjoyed the class and many of them felt that they had gained something from it.

b. Following the Willis model, I did not help them during the task phase of the task cycle. The students were left alone to use whatever language they had to do the task. As they moved to the planning phase, I could see how they put some thought into expressing their ideas. I told them that during this phase, they could ask me for help and suggestions. Most of the students took advantage of this, although some used dictionaries. They presented their answers to the three questions during the reporting phase. However, I now realise that I had compromised the objective of the planning and reporting phases, i.e. the movement towards greater accuracy, by not giving clear enough instructions. I omitted to tell students that I would not interrupt their reports. As a result, the students did not actually use summarising language as frequently as I had hoped

c. There was good overall fluency during the task cycle. I felt at the time that the learners' language was more accurate as the cycle progressed and the observer confirmed this. However, during the reporting phase, it was observed that I was prompting the student who was making the report. I had not made it sufficiently clear to the students that they would have to prepare a written report and read it out to the class. I can see how a teacher could mistakenly conclude that the task cycle does not work, as there did not seem to be a significant qualitative difference between the learners' language at the start and at the end of the cycle.

d. In retrospect, I realise that it may have been more appropriate to state discourse (the language of summarising) as the lesson's main aim because grammar was only going to be a supporting aim. I invited the learners to focus on words or phrases in the native speaker's summary, which might have been useful in doing their task. They successfully identified the appropriate language but did not ask questions about form. I feel that I did the students a disservice by not spending time on a practice activity. Instead, they re-entered the task cycle without having spent sufficient time focussing on and practising the new language.

Overall, this experiment showed me how effective task based learning can be because I saw how engaged the learners were and how the process of completing the task created a context for effective language input.

3.2 Action points

Having read about task based learning and having taught this class, I feel I have a much greater appreciation of the pros and cons of this approach. However, it seems to me that I am only beginning to realise what its potential and drawbacks are. My first reaction after the class was that I wanted to teach another task based class as soon as possible. Taking into account what I had learnt from the experience, I would like to continue researching TBL and using it in as many different teaching contexts as possible in order to experience for myself how effective it can be,

TBL and long term learners

Since, for the foreseeable future, the classes I am teaching are likely to be comprised of long term students, I would be very interested to see if teaching task based lessons on a continuous basis to them would add up to a comprehensive language syllabus. I would like to investigate this further as I would be curious to see how new language can be learnt organically rather than systematically.

Task design

The task I chose for the class was adapted from a text book. Already, I have begun to look at text book material in a new way, asking myself if it would be suitable for a task-based class. I have noticed that frequently, while the material may be suitable, very often activities suggested have to be made more concrete with an identifiable outcome.

I would be interested to see if I could design tasks which would successfully elicit certain language. This may be a useful in situation in which some learners specifically request "input" on a particular area of grammar. Although the temptation might be to revert to an orthodox PPP approach, I am curious to see if the expressed need of the learner could be met by the task based approach.

Learner training

In a teaching context such as mine, which is a private language school, there are commercial demands made on the teacher to satisfy the clients' wishes. I foresee that sometimes the learner style of the client learner might not be compatible with the task based approach because s/he has learned to learn in a more traditional grammar-led way. In the case of long term learners, I would like to experiment with some learner training in order to help them benefit from this method.

3.3 Evaluation of the lesson and action points

Aims: The learners completed the task as stated in the aims. Although they were given the opportunity to practise the new language by re-entering the task cycle, not all the students actually used it.

Action: Include specific practice activities such as repetition, gap-filling and memory challenge as suggested by Willis (pp110-113)

Systems aim: During the planning phase, I answered students' questions and helped them correct their grammatical errors. During the analysis stage, they didn't ask any questions about form
Action: In future, I would make the analysis stage more of an event by using an overhead projector. I had handed out transcripts of the native speaker's summary and this was too similar to what had happened during the task cycle. I would also try preparing specific questions about form, asking them to notice certain features of the language.

Skills aim: The learners had plenty of opportunities to improve their reading. On the whole, the very act of doing the task was a successful integrative skills experience. Although not a stated aim, writing is an essential part of the task based lesson. The learners did not make the most of the opportunity, largely because my instructions were not clear enough.
Action: Be more explicit when giving instructions for the planning and reporting phases.

Teaching Skills: Thanks to the observation comments from my course tutor, I realise that a key factor in implementing a successful task based lesson is the clarity of instructions, especially during the task cycle. I have to ensure that they understand that they will be making a formal presentation, possibly asking them to stand up in front of the class, so the that they are the focus of attention and not me. I will not start them off or prompt them. Thus, they will assume the full responsibility of planning and presenting the report.

4. Appendices

Appendix 1

Observation tasks

Objective:

1. To note examples of learners' relative fluency and accuracy as they move through the task cycle phases.
2. To note any questions coming from students regarding form of NS' language

First Task Phase

Fluent   **Accurate**

First Planning Phase

Fluent   **Accurate**

First Report Phase

Fluent   **Accurate**

Analysis stage: what (if anything) did learners notice in the native speaker's language?

<u>Second Task Phase</u>

Fluent   **Accurate**

Second Planning Phase

Fluent   **Accurate**

<u>Second Report Phase</u>

Fluent   **Accurate**

Appendix 2

Student Questionnaire

1. Did you find the topic of this class (circle one):
    a. very interesting
    b. interesting

c. not very interesting

Comment:

_____

_____

2. Did this class give you the opportunity to improve your: (number 1-4)
    a. reading
    b. writing
    c. listening
    d. speaking

Comment:

_____

_____

3. How useful was this class for: (number 1-3)
    a. grammar
    b. vocabulary
    c. pronunciation

Comment:

_____

_____

4. What did you like about this class?

_____

_____

_____

5. What did you dislike about this class?

_____

_____

_____

5. Bibliography

Background reading

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