

Some Notes on Task-Based Learning

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The English word 'task' is generally rendered in educational contexts by *завдання* in Ukrainian and in Russian by *задание*, and this is the cause of some confusion among Ukrainian teachers of English when it comes to understanding the concept of Task-Based Learning (TBL). With these mother tongue terms in mind, a teacher may describe anything she wants learners to do as a task, with instructions such as 'For your home task, I want you to' rolling readily off the tongue. The confusion is understandable as the very particular meaning of 'task' in the context of TBL is relatively new, and there are no immediately obvious substitute translations of *завдання* or *задание* in their everyday meanings. Also, as with so many other terms in the field of language teaching methodology, there is no term in Ukrainian or Russian that fully corresponds to TBL in English, and this makes it less likely that the approach will be fully understood and implemented in practice, given the fact that most teaching of methodology in Ukrainian universities has hitherto been carried out in L1.

With all this as background, this short article aims to outline the key principles of TBL and to locate it within a broader view of communicative language teaching (CLT) in the hope that it will contribute to enhanced understanding and some experimentation with the approach in English language classroom and in training contexts.

Nunan (2004) offers this useful definition of 'task' in the context of language learning:

"any classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form" (p. 4).

Examples of tasks which fit Nunan's definition might include these two:

- Work in groups of 3 or 4 to produce a survey questionnaire for undergraduate students on their reading habits (*to do this, students have to **understand** the task, know how to **manipulate** language to produce a satisfactory set of questions, **interact** and negotiate in their group to reach agreement and **produce** and administer the questionnaire*)
- **Step One:** Individually, collect a dozen or more examples of phrasal verbs in context, and write each down *in its context* on a slip of paper.
Step Two: In class, form groups of 3/4 and pool all your findings. Lay them out on the table, and try to sort them into categories of your own choosing. Make sure that you all understand and can explain the criteria you use for categorising. Prepare a 5-minute group presentation on your findings and your decisions. Use a poster, Power Point or a transparency to support your presentation.
(there may be further steps, but here students are asked to do some research, to arrive at an understanding of Phrasal Verbs and how they are used, to share that understanding in groups in order to categorise them, and to produce a presentation)

Skehan (1998) describes the key elements of TBL in this way:

“(a) meaning is primary, (b) learners are not given other people’s meanings to regurgitate, (c) there is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities, (d) task completion has priority, and (e), the assessment of tasks is done in terms of outcome” (p. 147).

Clearly, Skehan’s definition could embrace the notion of task in any educational or training context, and it is this dimension that made the notion of TBL so attractive to proponents of Communicative Language Teaching. The insistence on the primacy of meaning over form, and the emphasis on product and outcome, as key elements of TBL is what distinguishes the notion of ‘task’ from that of ‘activity’ (e.g. a shopkeeper/customer role play, an icebreaker or warmer at the start of a class) or ‘exercise’ (answering comprehension questions, filling gaps with verbs in the correct tense). In focussing on task fulfilment and on an end product or outcome, learners will behave in a way that replicates language use in authentic, real life settings outside the classroom.

TBL has not been without its critics. Some teachers feel uneasy at handing over more control to learners in the classroom, perhaps because of concern about use of the mother tongue in small group work or about mistakes going uncorrected. There may also be classroom management worries about the timing of group work or noise levels. Other teachers find it difficult to abandon the tradition of teaching grammatical form as a prerequisite to producing meaning, as in the grammar-translation method. These reservations are understandable, but most of them are addressed in the realisation of a typical TBL cycle, which might consist of the following stages (adapted from <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/a-task-based-approach>):

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.

Task

Students complete a task in pairs or groups using the language resources that they have as the teacher monitors and offers encouragement. The teacher may also make useful language resources available to students (lists of vocabulary, exponents of relevant language functions, for example), which students can draw on without being obliged to use them.

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 or difficulties they may have.

Report

Students then report back to the class orally or read the written report. The teacher or students may ask questions.

Feedback and Analysis

The teacher (and perhaps also the other students) highlights interesting features from the report, focussing on content first and foremost. At this stage, the teacher can also focus on 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.

The issue of class control is addressed in this sequence through careful task design and task-setting, and subsequently by monitoring. If the task is clearly explained to students so that they feel secure, they will engage with it productively. The teacher is responsible now for processing the emerging language produced by the students while they are involved in the task, rather than presenting language to be subsequently practised and produced by learners. This language can be practised in whatever ways the teacher and students see fit, but it can immediately be seen as relevant by the students because it arose during the completion of the task.

These days there are plenty of examples of tasks in published textbooks, but they are not always presented in the same order as in the sequence suggested above. Tasks sometimes appear only at the final stage of a coursebook unit, where they are meant to consolidate the language presented at the start of the unit. This clearly makes demands on a teacher as there will be a need to adapt and rearrange coursebook materials to fit a more learner-centred model. Teachers may also need to shift the focus of assessment from knowledge-based tests of grammar, vocabulary or comprehension to continuous assessment of learner performance according to transparent, skill-based criteria. TBL is particularly well suited to use in connection with a topic-based syllabus, such as is favoured in official documentation in Ukraine. It is also eminently suited to in-service and pre-service teacher training programmes, since teachers are by nature practical 'doers' rather than theorists, and learning by doing, as in TBL, has long been seen as a powerful approach to professional learning. This is the approach we recommend in the implementation of the new PRESETT Methodology Curriculum in Ukraine, and the one which is exemplified in the associated sample training materials for each module. See also Tanner & Green (1998) for an example of task-based training materials.

However, and in conclusion, adopting TBL is not just a case of changing one's lesson plan. It requires a shift in thinking about teacher and learner roles: the learner as a generator of the target language and an active participant in the learning process, and the teacher or trainer as a task designer, language informant, manager, monitor, and facilitator of learning rather than as conductor of the orchestra, sole source of language input or punitive corrector of errors. In both cases however, the teacher needs to offer a good model of the target language for learners to imitate and aspire to.

References

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Skehan P. 1998 *A Cognitive Approach to Language Learning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
Tanner R. & C. Green 1998 *Tasks for Teacher Education*. Harlow: Pearson Longman