Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)

Tasks
A task-based approach attempts to empower learners with the means to do something effectively in the language.

Definitions of tasks by different authors

A task is considered to be a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused principally (although not exclusively) on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning.

David Nunan, 1987

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

Jane Willis, 1996

A task is an activity in which
- meaning is primary
- learners are not given other people’s meanings to regurgitate
- there is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities
- the completion has some sort of priority
- the assessment of the task is in terms of the outcome

Peter Skehan, 1998

A task is a work plan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed. To this end, it requires them to give primary attention to meaning and to make use of their own linguistic resources, although the design of the task may predispose them to choose particular forms. A task is intended to result in language use that bears a resemblance, direct or indirect, to the way language is used in the real world. Like other language activities, a task can engage productive or receptive, and oral or written skills and also various cognitive processes.

Rod Ellis, 2003
PEDAGOGIC AND REAL-WORLD TASKS
Tasks help learners develop the skills they will need for carrying out real-world communicative tasks beyond the classroom; tasks may be classified as pedagogic or real-world tasks.

Real-World Tasks
Real-world tasks are communicative acts that are achieved through language in the world outside the classroom, such as buying clothes or presenting a report to a superior. Example: A person listens to a weather forecast on TV and chooses what clothing to take on a trip. In the real world, depending on the accuracy of the weather forecast, the person will take appropriate clothing (or not).

Pedagogic Tasks
Pedagogic tasks are those in which learners rehearse, in class, a communicative act that can be carried out outside of the class. Involvement in these tasks provides them with skills for real-world tasks. Many real-world tasks can be transformed into games, simulations, role-plays and the like in order to make them appropriate for the classroom. Example: Learners listen to taped weather forecast and decide what clothing to take on a trip to a given place.

While listening to the weather forecast, learners are getting the target language. Their attention is focused on selecting the appropriate clothing for the weather being described, not on the specific structure. They are rehearsing the skills needed for listening to a real weather forecast.

TASKS IN THE CLASSROOM
A task-based lesson does not involve a single task, but a sequence of related tasks; each task is preparation for the next one. Individual tasks within this sequence will have different characteristics and purposes, and as learners progress through the sequence, they are exposed several times to the language used to express meaning.

Tasks and Skills Development
There are four primary channels of communication, also called the four skills: Speaking, Listening, Reading, and Writing. Each one demands varied abilities; for example, giving a talk requires different abilities from understanding a talk given by someone else and from presenting the same information in written form or reading what someone else has written on the subject. However, communication in a language is not restricted to one skill or another; skills are combined and interconnected. For example, if you attend a conference and listen to a talk, you will probably take notes in order to write a report or describe the talk to friends or colleagues, and then follow it up by reading an article with another point of view about the same topic. Another person might read about a play in the newspaper, invite a friend to go to it, read the program and watch/listen to the play itself; later he/she might write an e-mail to a friend describing the play.

For most language learners, knowing a language means speaking it, but if “there is no listening without someone speaking and there is no speaking without someone listening,” we see that skills are not only
interconnected but require interaction. The language learner acts alternately as listener and speaker and co-jointly constructs conversation with one or more co-participants. **Productive and receptive processes overlap.** The listener and reader also participate actively in the creation of meaning, drawing on their linguistic knowledge, prior knowledge about the topic, cognitive processing skills, and contextual clues.

**Our goal in language teaching is to provide learners with a wide variety of activities that allow them to interact with different forms of input and output.** A course focused on reading skills, for example, will not only include the development of reading skills. It will also include: discussing a topic (speaking), listening to a conversation or statements on the topic to stimulate students’ interest (listening), focusing on the development of a reading strategy such as skimming (reading), and finally end with the learners writing a summary of part of the reading assignment (writing). The lesson becomes more engaging for the learners because it is more meaningful, and related activities in several skills provide recycling of the language elements. As a result, the integration of receptive and productive skills supports and strengthens language development.

Receptive skills are those in which learners do not need to produce the language; it is enough to understand it. Productive skills, on the other hand, are those in which learners produce either spoken or written language.

The following illustration shows how each skill is linked to another: for example, we read what someone else wrote, we write and someone else reads.

![Language Tasks and Language Development Table](attachment:image.png)

Tasks and Language Development

Tasks that enhance language development are based on grammatical items that are embedded in the input.

In order to express themselves appropriately and accurately, learners need to focus on these items, activate their emerging language skills (functions and structures), and progress from simply manipulating language provided by the teacher or textbook to creative language use for authentic communication.
The Phases of a Task Cycle
Task sequences are usually placed within the framework of a task cycle. A task cycle consists of three phases:

- a pre-task that prepares learners for the task and helps make the input comprehensible
- a while-task that encourages learners to process the input
- a post-task that encourages learners to access their developing linguistic system, a natural conclusion where learners produce oral or written output.

THE WARM-UP
The first step in the task-based lesson is to give learners an opportunity to activate their general knowledge of the world (What’s this lesson going to be about? – oh, yes, I know something about that!), creating connections between their background knowledge and the input by means of the warm-up or introduction to the topic.

PRE-TASKS (or Preparation Tasks)
Since the warm-up is a very general introduction, learners need to relate to the topic in a more specific way. Pre-tasks are also an opportunity to process topic-related lexical items they will need in order to understand the input. In other words, pre-tasks provide scaffolding for the learners’ comprehension of the input. They should actively involve all learners and above all, create interest.

Beginners (True Beginners, A1) and even low A2 learners (when their learning experiences have not been communicative), need to learn to understand others and express themselves through social language, interacting with others. The language items (functions and structures) are found in the conversation, so the language work takes place immediately after learners become aware of them. As learners gradually build up their conversational strategies, these tasks can gradually be phased out.

In the case of lower-level learners, the teacher will need to design tasks that help learners discover the meaning and relationships between key lexical items.

Learners also will be more actively involved when they are challenged to try to figure out or predict something about the input.

WHILE-TASKS
Processing the Input
Cognitive theory tells us that learners must process the input, or do something with it, so that this information is transferred to long term memory.

This is closely related to the information processing model of memory:
Learners are actively involved in looking for information / solutions to a problem in the input (a reading or listening text). As they interact with the input to find this information or solve the problem, learners
process it by listening or reading for meaning. They must carry out the task in order to demonstrate comprehension of the input, making use of the language in the input.

Tasks focusing on Input

The task outcome is the evidence that learners effectively carried out the task, that is, that they are able to demonstrate that they understood the main idea that was expressed, that they identified specific information, or that they solved the problem. These task outcomes can take a number of different forms.

However, learners cannot develop the ability to speak by simply understanding the language. For instance, in courses such as “German for Reading Comprehension,” learners may understand a great deal of information but not be able to use the language in communicative situations.

LANGUAGE AWARENESS AND LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Learners are processing language as they are processing and making sense of the input. However, simply understanding is not enough. Learners need to participate in activities that draw their attention to the specific grammatical item in the input, reflect on its form, meaning, and use, and rehearse how to use it. The language item either fits in to their developing system (which leads to assimilation) or causes dissonance (which leads to accommodation). This continual process of assimilation or accommodation causes the rest of the linguistic system (or schema) to (re)structure itself.

Specific language items in the input become available to the learners’ developing system when:

• they are at the appropriate level of difficulty.
• they are noticed (learners are aware of them).
• they are experienced with sufficient frequency.
• they are needed in order to communicate effectively and appropriately.

POST-TASKS (or Communication Tasks)

For communication to take place, learners need to be able to access this developing language system in their long-term memory. In other words, access involves making use of the developing language system to create output.

The post-task offers learners opportunities to communicate, which include:

• sharing personal experiences (e.g., anecdotes, personal experiences, attitudes, opinions, preferences, personal reactions to situations).
• creative tasks (e.g., creative writing activities, investigations via Internet, displays and class magazines, role-plays and simulations)
• presenting items for the class to reach a consensus through a discussion or debate
• designing a parallel task based on their own data.
• writing a description.
In the case of post-tasks, the spoken or written communication is the task outcome.

Task-based learning is not just about getting learners to do one task and then another, and then another. Each succeeding task flows out of, and is dependent on, the one that precedes it; for example, task C is dependant on the success of task B. As a general (but not unvarying) rule, tasks should be sequenced from those dealing with input to those where the learner produces output (communication). The earlier tasks can act as models for the learner, providing them with models and language they can draw on when they communicate.

TRANSITIONS BETWEEN TASKS
For the lesson to flow smoothly from one task to another without discernible gaps, each task must be clearly linked to the one that follows. Smooth transitions make each task appear to be a continuation of the previous one.

Transitions are the small changes that take place when you move from a pre-listening task to a while-listening and on to a post-listening task, or when you change the pattern of interaction (you talk to the whole class and then have them work in pairs, or ask them to move their chairs and form groups). Without clear transitions, learners might think they are still on the previous task, or they might think the teacher is “lost,” and the lesson itself will appear “choppy”.

Some transitions are made subtly – e.g., when learners make predictions and the teacher says Now let’s find out how close those predictions were; others allow for a slight change in context or additional information (e.g., The Earth is the third planet from the Sun. It has an axis that is not vertical: it is tilted. Look at this globe (shows globe): it has a tilted axis (points); it’s not straight. Let’s find out how this is related with the Earth’s orbit.); yet others are designed to show learners how different tasks are linked to the one that follows (e.g., so we’ve listened to people describe their hometowns, we’ve practiced describing cities, and we’ve talked about our hometowns. Now, what we’re going to do is …).

In each of the above examples, the teacher has smoothly changed contexts by using an appropriate transition between one task and the next. The transition is followed by the instructions for the following task.

Transitions may also be interactive, allowing the teacher to quickly elicit some information from the learners, e.g., who’s your favorite actor / actress? (Students respond) OK, well, I have some information about …..

Successful transitions:
• are generally quick and smooth
• help keep the learners involved
• clarify the relationship between one task and the next
• minimize loss of momentum