

TASK-BASED LESSONS

LESSON 2: NORTH POLE, SOUTH POLE

If you would like to learn something about the rationale behind TBLT look at the commentary:

RATIONALE FOR TASK-BASED TEACHING: FROM MEANING TO FORM.

This lesson is based on a simplified version of an academic text. You can find the original text on http://sciam.com/print_version.cfm?articleID=000F04F4-5DD2-1EB1-BDC0809EC588EEDF . You may want to ask your class to take a look at this after the lesson.

Basically the lesson is a discussion leading up to a reading. The question for discussion is:

WHICH IS COLDER: THE NORTH POLE OR THE SOUTH POLE?

1 Introduction

You may know the answer, to the question, but we asked a number of people what they thought and only one was confident that he knew the answer, and he was doing a PhD in environmental science at Lancaster. So you can probably be reasonably sure that most of your students will not be sure of the answer. You can begin simply by putting the question to the class, perhaps by putting it to a vote and asking one or two students to give reasons for their answers.

2 Discussion of relevant questions

You might then put learners into groups to discuss these statements and decide if they are true or false:

- 1 There is no land at the Antarctic – only an ice-cap.*
- 2 The polar regions get very little sunshine compared with other latitudes.*
- 3 The ice is several metres thick in the middle of the Arctic Ocean.*
- 4 For six months in the year there is no sunshine in the Arctic.*
- 5 Water keeps in the heat of the sun better than dry land.*
- 6 The Antarctic is by far the highest of the five continents, rising to more than two thousand metres above sea level.*

You might begin by looking at the questionnaire with the class as a whole and making sure they understand the questions. Then let them discuss the questions in groups. The answers are as follows:

1. False. There is land at the Antarctic. Students may be aware that there is competition among the major world powers to establish mineral rights in the area.
2. True. At the poles there is sunshine for only six months of the year.
3. False. The ice cap is very thin. In fact there have been reports in the press recently that much of the ice is disappearing altogether.
4. True. See 2 above. But of course it's also true of the Antarctic.
5. True.
6. True. It doesn't have the highest points in the world – those are to be found in the Himalayas. But it is on average the highest continent.

In order to maintain interest in the coming discussion I would leave these questions unanswered for the time being. Hear what students have to say in a teacher led discussion without confirming or denying what they say.

3 Discussion

Put learners into groups and ask them to reach a decision. You should appoint one member of the group to act as *spokesperson* and speak for the group after the discussion. You may also want to allot other roles. You might, for example, ask one learner to act as group secretary, taking notes but not taking part in the discussion. Or you might want to appoint a *chair* in each group, whose job is to control the discussion, nominating speakers and summing up at the end.

Once the discussion begins try to leave learners to get on with it by themselves as far as possible. They may ask you for help with vocabulary, but in general they should express things for themselves. They will probably not be too concerned with grammatical accuracy at this stage. They will be involved in the discussion and trying hard to make their opinions heard. This means they will be speaking spontaneously and in these circumstances grammatical accuracy is a secondary consideration. The communicative situation is spontaneous and informal, so they will not be giving careful consideration to the form of what they are saying.

4 Preparation

Tell the groups that in five minutes their spokesperson may be asked to report the group discussion to the class as a whole. They have five minutes to help the spokesperson prepare for this.

During this preparation phase they will be more concerned with grammatical accuracy. The spokespersons are going to speak to the class as a whole as a representative of the group. They have had time to consider what they are going to say. In these circumstances they will be expected to speak formally, and part of this is grammatical accuracy. Because of this they may ask you for help with formulating their message and you should be prepared to help.

5 Report

Ask one or two of the spokespersons to present the views of their group. What was their decision? Was it unanimous? What were the reasons for their decision? You may want to help out by asking supplementary questions. After each report you can summarise what has been said.

6 Decision making

Take a final vote on the question. Ask one or two people to give a reason for their view.

7 Reading

Give learners this text to read:

WHICH IS COLDER: THE NORTH POLE OR THE SOUTH POLE?

The North and South poles are both very cold because they get very little sunshine compared with the rest of the earth. The sun never rises more than 23.5 degrees above the horizon, and for six months of the year the poles get no sunshine at all. Also most of the sunlight is reflected back by the bright white surface. So both poles are very cold, but the South Pole is much colder than the North Pole because it sits on top of a very thick ice sheet, which itself sits on dry land, on the continent of Antarctica. The top of the ice sheet near the South Pole is more than 3,000 metres above sea level – more than a mile and a half high, so Antarctica is by far the highest continent on earth. In comparison the North Pole rests in the middle of the Arctic Ocean, where the surface of the ice is only about a foot above the sea. Water keeps in more heat than dry land so the Arctic Ocean retains the heat, making it less cold in winter and warmer in the summer.

They will be reading with a real purpose – to find out whether they are right or wrong in their conclusion and their arguments.

8 Review

Ask learners to put away their texts and summarise the passage orally. You could ask them to prepare this in groups.

9 Language Study

9.1 Consciousness-raising

Ask learners to go through the text underlining all the expressions to do with *comparison*. Go through and hear their contributions. In general they will identify phrases with a comparative or superlative adjective, but there are also a couple of useful phrases: *compared with* and *in comparison*. Here is a list of the expressions that I identified:

1. *Which is colder*: the North Pole or the South Pole?
2. They get *very little sunshine compared with* the rest of the earth.
3. The sun never rises *more than 23.5 degrees* above the horizon.
4. The South Pole is *much colder than* the north Pole.
5. The top of the ice-sheet is *more than 3,000 metres* above sea-level, more than a mile and a half high.
6. Antarctica is *by far the highest continent* on earth.
7. *In comparison* the North Pole rests in the middle of the Arctic Ocean....
8. Water keeps in *more heat than* dry land.
9. The ocean retains the heat, making it *less cold in winter* and *warmer in the summer*.

You can show the class this list then remove the italicised words and see if they can recall them. You can then remove the sentences and ask them to work in pairs to see how many they can recall.

9.2 Vanishing words

This is an exercise which Dave describes in his book *Rules, patterns and words*. He called it *progressive substitution*, but when Scott Thornbury borrowed the exercise he gave it the much catchier title of vanishing words.

This is how it works. Take a sentence which contains one or two useful phrases or grammar points and show it to the class:

Both poles are very cold, but the South Pole is much colder than the North Pole.

Ask a couple of people to read out the sentence, then remove one or two words and see if they can remember it:

**** poles are **** cold, but the South Pole is **** colder **** the North Pole.

Then remove more words and ask learners to try again to recall the sentence:

**** poles *** **** cold, but *** South Pole is **** ***** **** the North Pole

Continue this process until you have removed all the words leaving only a string of blanks:

**** ***** *** **** ***** , *** *** ***** ***** ** **** ***** **** ***
***** ****

And see if learners can still recall the sentence. You can vary the difficulty of this exercise in a number of ways:

- by choosing a longer or shorter and more or less complex sentence.
- by varying the number of words you remove at each stage.
- by varying the number of repetitions of the full sentence at each stage.
- by allowing learners to work in groups or making them work as individuals.

9.3 Link to Grammar Book

You can go to the learners' grammar book and find appropriate exercises to reinforce what they have been doing. You might, for example, want to look at *Collins Cobuild Intermediate Grammar* Units 35 and 36.