

# Task-based Language Teaching: from meaning to form

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## Characterising tasks: not ‘Is this a task?’ but ‘How task-like is it?’

‘We can determine how task-like a given activity is by asking the following questions. The more confidently we can answer *yes* to each of these questions the more task-like the activity.

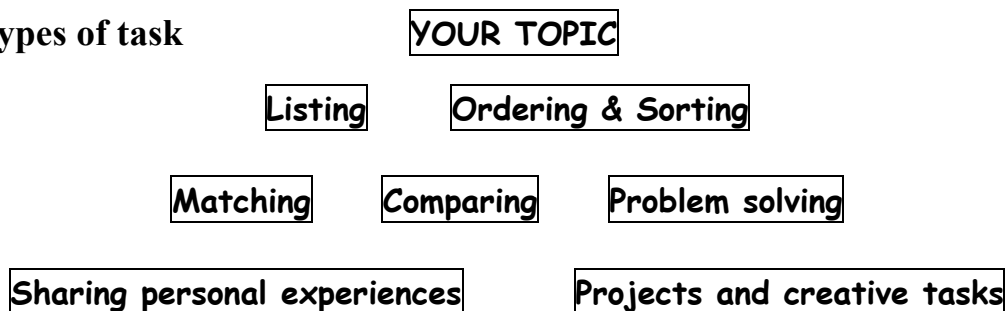
- a) Does the activity engage learners’ interest?
- b) Is there a primary focus on meaning?
- c) Is there an outcome?
- d) Is success judged in terms of outcome? Is completion a priority?
- e) Does the activity relate to real world activities?’

These criteria do not constitute ‘a watertight *definition* of what constitutes a task, but they will provide us with *guidelines for the design of activities* which are task-like in that they involve *real language use.*’ (Dave Willis & Jane Willis *Doing Task-based Teaching* OUP 2007).

## Examples of tasks

- ▶ Memory challenge – objects on a tray (beginners; teacher led > pairs)
- ▶ Guess what I’ve got in my bag today! (beginners; teacher led > pairs)
- ▶ Draw up your ideal school timetable (elementary; 11-12 year olds)
- ▶ How strict are/were your parents? Whose parents are/were the strictest?
- ▶ Plan a class party for the end of term (mind map > group decision)
- ▶ Describe how to make your favourite food; classify dishes, compare recipes
- ▶ Earthquake safety – design a leaflet for overseas visitors

## Seven types of task



You can choose **any topic** (e.g. *parties, school subjects, cats, cell phones*) and design a sequence of tasks using three or four (or more) different types of task.

## Task-based lesson framework – from meaning to form

### Priming & Preparation

Exploring topic, highlighting words & phrases

### Task Cycle

Task(s) >> Planning >> Report

### Form focus

Analysis and Practice

## So why Task-based Learning?

A majority of learners leave school unable to communicate in the Foreign Language they have been learning. Why is this? SLA research (and our own classroom experience) tells us that people do not learn grammar step by step. Grammar is far too complex and extensive to explain and practice bit by bit. Learners often avoid speaking because they are worried about getting their grammar right. Tasks give learners the chance to focus on using language to create their own meanings – using words and expressions they can recall, and then refine and build on that language as the task cycle progresses. When they find they can achieve the task goals, even with their limited English, they gain confidence, feel liberated, their motivation increases, they learn more and become better communicators.

TBLT provides learners with natural **exposure (input)**, chances to **use language** (without fear of getting things wrong) to express what they want to mean (**output**), to focus on **improving their own language** as they proceed from Task to Report stage, and to **analyse and practise forms**.

Jason Moser reports from Japan ‘Teachers see their **students come to life during the task cycle**’

### References

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- Leaver B. and J. R. Willis 2004 *Task-based Instruction in FLE: practices and programs* Georgetown University Press
- Liria, P. (ed) 2009 *L'approche actionnelle dans l'enseignement des langues* SBL
- Paterson A. and J. Willis 2008 *English Through Music* Oxford University Press
- Willis D. 2003. *Rules, Patterns and Words: Grammar and Lexis in English Language Teaching*. Cambridge University Press
- Willis D. and J. Willis, 2007 *Doing Task-based Teaching* Oxford University Press**

### Useful websites

An excellent introductory article on TBL (Planning a party) by Richard Frost:  
<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/articles/a-task-based-approach>

Four articles on TBL by Jane Willis can be found at:

<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/articles/criteria-identifying-tasks-tbl>

**Free task-based lesson plans at [www.willis-elt.co.uk](http://www.willis-elt.co.uk)** including: How strict were your parents? Which is colder, the North Pole or the South Pole? **And lots more...**