Designing and using communicative tasks

Jane Willis

Honorary Visiting Fellow, Aston University

1. Characteristics of effective tasks

'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)   Are learners allowed **free use of language**?
d)   Is there **an outcome**?
e)   Is **success** judged in terms of **outcome**? Is **completion** a priority?
f)   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).

2. Task-based lesson framework

> **Priming & Preparation**
> **Key lexis & useful phrases**
> **Task(s) >> Planning >> Report**
>   **Language extension >>Prestige Language Use**
> **Form focus**
> **Analysis and practice of language features**
> **from texts (written or spoken) that learners have read or heard**

3. Seven types of task – to plan a task sequence based on a topic or text

Listing,   Ordering & Sorting (sequencing, ranking, classifying),
Matching, Comparing,
Problem solving,   Sharing personal experiences,   Projects and creative tasks.

4. So why Task-based Learning?

TBL provides learners with natural **exposure** (**input**), chances to **use language** to express what they want to mean (**output**), to focus on **improving their own language** and to **analyse and practise forms**.

TBL is more likely to keep learners **motivated** since it builds on whatever language they know in a positive way. Learners are **actively engaged** throughout the task cycle, and get chances to think for themselves and express themselves in the security of their group. They are **more autonomous** and feel empowered, gaining satisfaction from successfully achieving things through language.

Workshop: Refining task instructions: four parameters you can adjust:

1 Goal / outcome

Devise a **final goal / outcome** that is clear to students; break it down into **stages** (with opportunities for exposure and output) so learners know (precisely) how to achieve it.

2 Pre-task preparation

Individual learners can think ahead how to do the task (strategic planning) and plan the language they need. This helps to stimulate engagement.
But sometimes let them do a task without preparation, spontaneously (involves different skills).

3 Interaction patterns: individuals, pairs, groups, whole class. Plus or minus individual **roles**: chairperson, spokesperson, secretary, editor, language advisor.

4 Post-task activities

- planning and giving a report of the task
- reflecting then repeating the task with other partners
- comparing recordings of task done by others
- form focused study, noting useful words, phrases and patterns
- learners recording themselves summarising or repeating the task
- reflecting and evaluating on the process, writing feed-back.

Making time for tasks in class

Use **class time** for activities that give experience of **real language in use,** experience that learners might not get outside class, especially **spontaneous spoken interaction**.

Outside class
Some **text book activities** are best done at the **learner's own pace** – set these for homework, to be checked quickly at start of next lesson. For example, get learners to:
- prepare topic and task related vocabulary at home prior to the task
- do form-focused exercises (grammar, vocabulary) for homework
- do the listening / reading and follow up activities in their own time
Encourage **independent vocabulary learning** and **out of class projects & surveys.**

Task-based teaching: some general principles

➢ Aim at richer interactions in class – focus on meaning first, form later.

➢ Use your text-books flexibly: 'taskify' them

➢ Explore what happens when you use tasks: get learner feedback (Edwards & Willis)

➢ Collaborate with your colleagues – '*collaboration is the key*' (Willis & Willis 2007)