

TASKS IN TBL:  
WHAT KINDS OF TASKS PROMOTE MEANINGFUL COMMUNICATION?

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the process of developing and implementing TBL tasks in the EFL classroom. A title page is included. A non-specific abstract was created and included. The structure of this IPP is outlined in the Table of Contents. Teaching context as well as the reasons for my choice of the topic are described in the introduction. Research into ESL/EFL source literature on the topic is illuminated in Chapter 1. Classroom Observations based on the teaching journal kept throughout the project are depicted in Chapter 2. Implications for the use of this paper are considered in terms of advantages for teachers trying to introduce Task-based learning in their classroom.

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## INTRODUCTION

For a long period of time PPP, which stands for presentation, practice and production, has been the main lesson framework in EFL teaching. It is based on the belief that language can be learned through mastering separate structures, each one building on the one before. Learners start with focus on accuracy and then develop fluency.

However, up-to-date research into Second Language Acquisition has shown that ‘learners do not acquire the target language in the order it is presented to them, no matter how carefully teacher and text books organize it. Language learning is a developmental, organic process that follows its own agenda’ (Foster 1999:69). These ideas have led to the development of a contrasting approach to language teaching that is known as Task-based learning (TBL).

Willis, J. (1996) described the task-based framework as a model consisting of pre-task (introduction to topic and task), task cycle (task, planning, and report) and language focus (analysis and practice). This allows learners to focus on meaning by using whatever language they have in the first two stages and then only in the last stage is there an emphasis on form, on accuracy.

Such a way of organizing a lesson has a number of advantages. First of all, students have regular opportunities to practice skills and language they might need in real life. The element of planning in the task cycle encourages students to think about the language they need and results in better quality language use. Using tasks motivates students, because they want to achieve the task outcomes. As learners choose the

language needed themselves, they are more likely to absorb it. And finally, language focus in the last stage prevents learners from fossilization, and creates opportunities for individual improvement.

From what is said above, it is obvious that the central concept of TBL is the task itself. What is a task? How can tasks be implemented? What kinds of tasks promote meaningful communication? These are the questions that determined the goals and objectives of the present project.

The subjects of the project are 12 teenage students from intermediate EFL class at Lingua English Language School in the capital of Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek. The school was organized with the help of Soros Foundation Kyrgyzstan. The mission of the school is to improve teaching English in Kyrgyzstan where older Soviet-style teaching, with a major element of grammar translation, is still dominant.

Lingua school provides teacher-training workshops on communicative methodology for English teachers of Bishkek and in this way promotes up-to-date methods and techniques. All Lingua teachers are expected to use these methods in their own teaching.

The age of the students participating in the project ranges from 14 to 17 (this is the age group I usually work with). All of them study English at secondary schools. However, because of the quality of state education, even after several years of studying students often can not speak English. In order to acquire communicative competence, they have to look for additional English courses such as those our school provides. In other words, when students come to our school they want to develop spoken fluency first. TBL with its focus on fluency seems to be exactly what the students need. Therefore,

there are two main reasons for my choice of the topic of the present project. The first one is the needs of my students to develop spoken fluency. The second one is the expectations of the administration of the school I am working at to implement new student-centered ways of teaching English.

The course book for this level is *Inside Out Intermediate* by Sue Kay & Vaughan Jones, published by Macmillan Heinemann in 2000. The primary goal of the book according to the authors is 'to develop real-life communicative skills and powers of self-expression' (Kay, S. & V. Jones 2000: 146). Each unit is organized around two or three related topics, which gives students lots of opportunities for recycling. *Inside Out* is filled with speaking activities that focus on developing students' fluency. These activities are linked to the topics, lexis and grammar in the unit, so students can turn input into output. To paraphrase it, the authors of the book use a typical PPP framework.

*Inside Out* doesn't have a task-based element, which I think could be really useful for my students. That's why I decided to develop some TBL tasks based on the material presented in the book and implement them in my classroom.

The goals and objectives of the project defined the structural outline. The project has two chapters, an introduction and a conclusion. In chapter 1 I will investigate ESL/EFL source literature to find out what published writers say on the chosen topic. Chapter 2 will deal with my experience with TBL tasks in my classroom. I will describe the activities I have developed and used in my classroom. In the conclusion I will analyze the outcomes of my experiment.

## CHAPTER 1

## 1.1 TASKS IN TBL

The ‘task’ has become a fundamental concept in language teaching. Nunan, D. argues that it ‘has evolved as an important component within curriculum planning, implementation, and evaluation’ (Nunan 1991: 279). The role of task has been the subject of a number of recent journals articles (see, for example, Nunan 1991, Nobuyoshi & Ellis 1993, Long & Crooks 1992, Thornbury 1997 etc.) and books (see Nunan 1989, Crooks, G. & S. Gass 1993, Willis, J. & D. Willis 1996 etc.) Task has also developed into the unit of analysis in some current course books (see, for example, Cunningham, S. & P. Moor. 1998. Cutting Edge Series. London: Longman).

What is a task? The Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics defines a task as ‘any activity or action which is carried out as the result of processing or understanding language (i.e., as a response). For example, drawing a map while listening to a tape, listening to an instruction and performing a command’ (Richards, P. & H. Weber 1985: 289). According to the authors, tasks provide a purpose for the activity; they do not practice language for its own sake.

A similar interpretation of tasks is given by Skehan, P. who describes tasks as ‘activities which have meaning as their primary focus. Success in the task is evaluated in terms of achievement of an outcome, and tasks generally bear some resemblance to real-life language use’ (Skehan 1996: 20). The value of tasks according to the authors is their similarity to the things people do in everyday life. This similarity is based on the fact that every task must have an outcome.



The same ideas were stated by Willis, J. She suggests that a task is ‘a goal-oriented activity in which learners use language to achieve a real outcome’ (Willis 1996: 53). This is what is meant by a task in TBL.

Examples of TBL tasks can be interviews, story-telling, problem-solving, ranking discussions, etc. These activities are widely used in typical PPP textbooks as well. Thus New Headway English Course Intermediate by Soars, L & J. Soars (1996) contains examples of discussions (p.12) (In pairs students have to put inventions in the order of importance. Then pairs work together to persuade the others that their order is best), storytelling (p. 26) (Students match the beginning and the ending of the sentences using while, for, during. Then they use these sentences to create a story), interviews (p.9) (Students have information about a journalist. They don’t have the same information as their partner. They ask questions and complete the information.).

To put it another way, there is nothing new in these activities themselves; the new thing is in the way they are treated in TBL. The authors of Cutting Edge Intermediate, the book that employs a task-based syllabus, mention that the task is ‘an end in itself rather than an opportunity to practice specific language’ (Cunningham, S. & P. Moor 1998: 4). Learners can use whatever language they have, because the main objective for them is to achieve a particular communicative goal. In other words, tasks in TBL provide message-oriented communication – ‘rare and precious moments in foreign language teaching when the target language is actually used as a means of communication’ (Klippel 2002:3).

Message-oriented communication is different from language-oriented communication which usually exists in the language classroom. The latter is

characterized by using more or less controlled exercises to practice certain grammar areas. In other words, during language-oriented communication language is used for its own sake. It is obvious that it may happen only in the classroom. In real life people communicate to achieve an objective, or to perform a function. Since language teachers want their students to acquire communicative skill in the foreign language, activities providing message-oriented communication should be employed in the classroom.

Larsen-Freeman, D. (2000) referring to Morrow mentions three characteristics of a truly communicative activity: information gap, choice, and feedback. Information gap means a lack of information between participants working on the same problem. In order to find a solution they have to exchange the information they have. An example of an information-gap activity can be partially-completed crossword puzzle. Students work in pairs. One student has words across, the other – down. They have to explain their words to each other, guess the words and complete the puzzle.

Something similar to an information gap is an opinion gap. It is created by the fact that different people have different views and feelings on the same ideas and texts. Participants of an opinion gap activity have to describe and very often defend their views and feelings. For example, students are presented with the list of different personality qualities. Each student should think about how important he considers each quality for an ideal boyfriend/girlfriend. He rearranges the list in order of importance. Then students sit together in small groups and talk about their ranking of the qualities. They need to choose three the most important qualities for an ideal boyfriend/girlfriend.

In real life communication speakers have a choice of what to say and how to say. However, in the classroom the teacher very often decides and limits the language students

can use in order to practice specific language. Students do not have a choice, and such activities, therefore, are not communicative.

Real life communication is purposeful. Speakers decide if their purpose has been achieved based on the feedback they get from their listeners. If speakers do not get any feedback from their listeners, the activity they are involved in is not truly communicative. Therefore transforming sentences into questions, when speakers do not get any response from listeners, aims only at practicing grammar and has nothing to do with real-life communication.

To summarize, tasks in TBL are treated as an opportunity for communication. A genuine TBL task has the three elements essential for a truly communicative activity: information / opinion gap, choice and feedback. TBL tasks must have an identifiable outcome, which makes them similar to real-life tasks. Besides, this serves several methodological purposes. Ur, P. (1981) claims that a result of a task which is written down, ticked off, listed, or tape-recorded and then presented to the teacher and the rest of the class focuses and defines what students have to do. It can be a clear signal for the teacher that the students completed the task. And finally, it provides a basis for feedback. These are the main principles I will bear in mind while experimenting with the tasks in my classroom.

## 1.2 TASKS IMPLEMENTATION

As it was said earlier, TBL tasks primarily focus on meaning. Learners engaged in a TBL task try to achieve the task outcome by any means, and thus can get used to using unchallenging or inaccurate language. Even in real - life situations in order to get your message across you do not have to use complete well-formed utterances. Intonation, gestures, separate words and knowing the context are very often enough to keep the interaction going. Of course, native speakers can easily change their speech from using pre-fabricated lexicalized chunks into generating creative language, whereas L2 learners can not if they are not trained. So focus on meaning might be a potential drawback of TBL.

Seedhouse, P. analyzed transcripts of approximately 330 TBL lessons or lessons involving task based interaction and came to the conclusion that L2 learners engaged in task – based interaction produce ‘such a minimum display of their linguistic competence that it resembles a pidgin’ (Seedhouse 1999: 154).

In other words, the main danger of TBL is the problem of product versus process. Some learners become so skillful at task completion strategies that they manage to accomplish a task by very limited use of the target language. The challenge for a teacher applying task-based pedagogy is how to choose and implement tasks so that there is a

balance between focus on meaning and focus on form. It might seem contradicting the given definition of a task, but in fact it is more a necessary compromise if we want to develop our students' accuracy as well as fluency.

Skehan, P. (1996) developed a framework for task-based teaching that aims to avoid the development of fluency at the expense of accuracy. In task implementation he distinguished three stages: pre-, during and post.

At the pre-task stage, there are two main alternatives: an emphasis on the general cognitive demands of the task, and/ or an emphasis on linguistic forms. Examples of the activities of the first type are activating relevant knowledge, which is similar to the typical 'pre-' stage in a reading or listening activity; observing and doing similar tasks, planning. Explicit or implicit teaching of specific language forms that might be useful in the coming task, and consciousness – raising activities dealing with communication problems which may occur in the task are activities emphasizing linguistic forms. Skehan P. claims that these activities reduce cognitive demands of a task and allow learners to direct their attention to 'the more micro-activity of the detail of the language which is being used' (Skehan 1996:25).

At the during stage, the teacher can also influence accuracy and fluency. Skehan, P. mentions pressure of time, number of participants, providing visual support. Pressure of time makes learners use readily accessed language rather than create language in real time. That's why they are focused more on fluency and as a result they do not extend their existing language system.

The number of participants influences fluency as well. The more participants there are in a task, the more fluency will predominate over accuracy. Providing visual support makes tasks easier because learners do not have to bear in mind too many things. So they can redirect their attention to the language used.

Finally, post-task activities including public performance, analysis, and consciousness raising provide a concern for form. Public performance is very effective in terms of shifting the focus from product to process. If while doing a task, learners know that they will have to carry it out in front of an audience, they will try to think about the correctness and complexity of their language.

Consciousness-raising activities at the post-task stage encourage learners to reflect on language and draw their attention to how it works. Consciousness-raising activities promote noticing, which is seen as one of the most important conditions for second language acquisition (see Mitchell, R. & F. Myles 2002:138-140).

Willis, D. & J. Willis (1996) provide a list of operations learners can be asked to do while performing consciousness-raising activities. Students can be required to search data to identify a particular pattern or usage and the language forms associated with it.

They can classify a set of data according to similarities and differences. They can look for similarities and differences between their own language and English etc. Willis, D. & J. Willis point out that all these operations will result in 'an increased awareness of and sensitivity to language' (Willis, D & J. Willis 1996:69).

The three stages of task implementation developed by Skehan, P. shift the task focus from the product to the process. Learners pay more attention to the language

they use. This helps to create a balance between language-as-form and language-as-meaning.

Similar ideas are presented by Willis, J. (1996). She designed a framework consisting of pre-task (introduction to topic and task), task cycle (task, planning, report, and comparison with native speaker forms) and language focus (analysis and practice). Again, this framework aims at preventing learners from prioritizing fluency at the expense of accuracy.

To illustrate how this framework works, I would like to look at an example of a task from Cutting Edge Intermediate. In module 3 students plan a seven-day tour of their own country. The task starts with a preparation for task. The teacher introduces the topic and tries to raise students' interest. Then students listen to a recorded conversation between two people who are going to spend a week touring the south-west of Ireland by car and their Irish friend. After that students plan their own tour. The book provides useful language box containing phrases students might need during these stage. Students present their tour to each other and choose the most interesting one. Finally, at the language focus stage the teacher can deal with the mistakes students made while performing the task and raise students' awareness working with task link sections. This task deals with recommending and advising, so task link is devoted to the language used for this.

This example shows that students first try to complete a task and use whatever language they want. Useful language is provided, but students are not forced to use it.

The focus here is on communication, on fluency. Having finished the task, students are encouraged to think about language itself. They look back at the language they used and see how it can be improved. Working in this way, the teacher can achieve a balance between accuracy and fluency.

To conclude, I want to highlight the points I need to attend to while designing and implementing tasks. As research shows, besides being message – oriented and having identifiable outcome, tasks in TBL must be carefully chosen, sequenced and implemented in order to promote developing of learners' interlanguage system. Otherwise, the interaction students are involved in while doing a task can become ineffective in terms of second language acquisition, because students might tend to use unchallenging or inaccurate language.



## CHAPTER 2

### 2.1 IMPLEMENTING TASK-BASED FRAMEWORK

While doing the current project, I have created and implemented a number of TBL tasks. The first TBL task that I tried was aimed at knowing your partner's future intentions, hopes and ambitions. The students worked in pairs. Every student had a list of questions, which were different from the ones their partner had. There were questions such as *Do you think you'll ever marry a foreigner? Do you think you'll ever become a vegetarian? Do you think you'll ever become famous? Etc.* The students interviewed each other trying to find out what their partners thought about their future. At this point I monitored the students and listened to the language they used, but I did not correct them and did not ask them to use specific language. They were free to use whatever language they wanted. While doing so, I noticed that they used a variety of future forms, not always accurately, however. Some students stuck to *will* and *maybe + will*, but nevertheless, they were successful in terms of fulfilling the task. They asked and answered questions, they got feedback from listeners who showed understanding or asked follow-up questions. The task really worked at this stage and I think it was due to the presence of the essential elements of a truly communicative activity: information gap, choice of language and feedback from listeners.

I wanted my students to feel that the conversation they had was purposeful, so when they finished their interviews, I changed pairs and asked the students to tell their new partners what they had found out about their previous partners. Yet again there was a lot of authentic communication going on.

The next stage of the task was comparison with native speaker models. Before the class I recorded two native speakers, who work at our school, doing the same task. It was interesting for the students to listen to this conversation: firstly, because they knew these people; and secondly, because they just did the same task.

To begin with, I wanted to focus on meaning, so I asked the students to listen to the recording and note down the questions the speakers answered as well as their answers. For the second listening I set a language-oriented task. The students had to note down the language forms the speakers used to talk about future. It was rather challenging for the students, but they managed to notice *will*, *maybe + will* and *be going to*. Then I gave out the transcripts of the recording and asked them to look for more language forms used to talk about future. This time they were more successful and they came up with *the Present Continuous*, *might/may*, *will + definitely/probably* etc. We classified the language forms in terms of expressing how sure the speaker was. It was the end of the language focus stage.

To give the students some additional practice I repeated the same oral task but this time the students had different partners and different questions, which is a possible way of organizing the task cycle in TBL. Of course, I did not expect my students to use all the forms we highlighted at the previous stage, but they did use some of them. My

main hope was that they would recognize them the next time they came across them in a text or a recording.

On the whole, I felt my first experience with a self-created TBL task worked quite well. The students liked working in a new way. They were active and engaged in the task. As for the things I would do differently if I had to teach this lesson again, I think I would focus more on the pre-task stage – introduction to topic and task. This time there was just an open- class discussion about students’ future and then I handed out the questions. I think the introduction could be done in a more interesting and student-centered way. I could brainstorm ideas with the class and then ask students to make their own questions, so they would ask about what they really would like to know about. I could highlight some useful words and phrases student might attend to while performing the task. I feel that by involving students in participating more actively in the pre-task stage I could interest them in the topic, and help them recall relevant language. In doing so I would create conditions for better quality language use during the task stage.

The task cycle in TBL includes task, planning and report. While doing the task itself, students work in small groups or pairs. The emphasis here is on spontaneous talk and confidence building within the privacy of the small group. However, to develop their interlanguage system learners need to come across the challenge of talking in front of the whole class. They have to focus on fluency and accuracy and try to use the best language they have. This can be achieved through report planning on the outcomes of a task and giving the report itself.

Giving students time to prepare the report is very important in TBL. It helps students build up confidence and encourages them to think about what they are going to

say. This is the time when individual learners can ask about the language they need. As they want to know this language, they are more likely to acquire it. In this way, planning and report stages contribute to developing students' interlanguage system.

I noticed that in my first TBL task the above mentioned elements were neglected. The students worked in pairs, interviewed each other and then told their new partners what they had found out about their previous partners. They did not have any preparation time to think over what they were going to say and they felt secure as they continued working in pairs. So I decided to keep all this in mind while working on the next TBL task, which was based on the material from unit 11 Inside Out Intermediate.

The aim of the task was to identify the countries by looking at the pictures in the book. This time I tried to develop the pre-task stage in order to introduce the topic and raise students' interest. We started with an open-class discussion about traveling, talked about the places the students would like to visit and created a list of the most popular destinations. Then we switched over to talking about a round-the-world-trip. After that I asked the students to open their books and look at the picture of a young man named Conrad who had traveled around the world. There was a map with his route, so we could see if he had visited any countries and places from our list.

Then the task itself started. The students had 6 pictures, which were taken by Conrad on his trip. The students had to work in pairs and tried to identify the countries. While monitoring them, I noticed that they used only *maybe* to express uncertainties. It made me think that the language I was going to highlight (*might be, must be, can't be*) was unknown to them or not acquired properly. After that, in accordance with my intention to pay more attention to the planning stage I gave students time to think about

the ideas they were going to present to the whole class. I put some phrases on the board and said to the students that they could use them if they wanted to. While the students were planning their presentations, I was going round intending to help them with the language. However, the students did not seem to be interested in asking about the language, nor were they interested in planning and rehearsing their presentations. In contrast, they were willing to do them on the spot.

Reflecting on the experience I had I came to the conclusion that the planning stage did not work because the students were not used to working in these ways, that's why they needed more guidelines from the teacher. So I started thinking about how I could organize the planning stage, so that my students worked more productively. Eventually, I came up with some ideas which I implemented during the next TBL task which required the students to create a list of predictions for the future of our planet.

As usual, I started with a pre-task stage. My aim here was to raise students' interest and get them thinking. I thought that before talking about the future of our planet it might be interesting for the students to talk about their own lives in 50 years' time. Then we moved on to brainstorming the areas of life that would change and created a list of them on the board. After that I divided the class into small groups of 3 and asked them to choose 3 areas from the list on the board and predict how different these areas would be in future.

When the students finished their discussions, I told them that they were going to present their ideas to the whole class, so they needed to think how they were going to do it. On the board I put some guidelines which included the areas of the report the students needed to pay close attention to. There were such things as *Think about linking words you*

*can use to make your speech develop smoothly. Think what grammar you need to do the task. Think what vocabulary you need to do this task. Think who is going to talk. One person only? Every member of a group will contribute?* This time having these guidelines the students spent planning time more efficiently. They asked me questions about the vocabulary they did not know, about some linking words they needed. I could even see them rehearsing what they were going to say.

After about ten minutes the presentations began. I asked the students to listen to reports, comment afterwards and avoid repeating the same information. Setting the task this way, I created a real purpose for the students to listen to each other. While I was listening to the students' reports, I noticed that their language was much better. They used more challenging forms. Their speech was logical. There were fewer pauses and repetitions. Of course, there were mistakes, but they did not block the communication. The speech was comprehensible. It is obvious that this improvement in students' performance was due to the better prepared and structured planning stage they had.

All the TBL tasks that I had used before had a post-task listening when the students compared the way they did the task and the way fluent speakers of English did it. However, it is not the only way of organizing the task cycle. Instead of listening there can be reading.

Preparing the task about the future of our planet, I decided to try using a written text instead of a recorded one. So when the students presented their ideas I gave them a text containing the predictions made by a journalist who wrote about science and achievements. The task was to compare students' ideas and his ideas. Then I focused their attention on the language he used and had them find the future forms in the text. In

the end we had a list including Future Continuous and Future Perfect. This experience equipped me with another way of organizing a language focus stage and was useful for me in terms of diversifying my TBL classes.

One more thing I noticed while implementing the TBL tasks is that whether or not the students took risks and tried using the highlighted language while repeating a similar oral task depended on how familiar the students were with the language before. Sometimes the language I drew their attention to was not absolutely new for them. They had seen it before, but did not use it while performing the task because they forgot it or were not comfortable with it. In this case, during the follow-up task more students used the highlighted forms; on the contrary, in cases of entirely new language, more students stuck to the old forms.

Of course, it does not mean that previous exposure to target language is a requirement of TBL, but it describes the ideal situation for providing learners with the language they are seeking. The language focus stage in this case reinforces the learners' natural language development.

So far I have described some TBL tasks I implemented during the research. Now I am moving on to the discussion of classroom observations.

## 2.2 CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS

To collect the data, I kept a teaching journal. I chose this way of recording the data because it was familiar to me. I kept a teaching journal during my Interim Year Teaching Practicum and found it very convenient and useful. The journal provided me with an on-going record of classroom events and my reflections. It enabled me to analyze the data and answer the research questions of the present study.

My teaching journal contained the lesson plans and my reflections after teaching these lessons. I tried not to evaluate the lessons in terms of being good or bad, but reflect more on the stages of the lesson and techniques I used or could have used. It was difficult for me to stick to my intention until I came up with the questions I kept in mind while reflecting on my experience. These questions included the following: *What worked at the lesson? How do you know it worked? What did not work? Why did it not work? How would you change the lesson if you had to teach it again?* I also noted down my students' reactions towards the activities as well as my own feelings. I think such a way of organizing my teaching journal was useful and effective, as it let me be more objective and specific.

Another technique of collecting the data was asking the students to give me informal and formal feedback. Formal feedback was given in a written form. The students completed the questionnaires I designed. Informal feedback was in a form of a short dialogue at the end of an activity or a lesson. I decided to use this method of



collecting the data, because I wanted to tap into the opinion, ideas and experiences of my learners. My teaching journal, though I tried to make it more objective, was full of my own thoughts and feelings. Interestingly, there was not much difference between the data collected after informal and formal feedback. I have been working with this group of students for almost one year and with some of them even longer, so I think they got used to me and to giving feedback.

The data shows that even when I gave the students some useful phrases or words before a task, while doing a task, they mostly focused on the message they needed to put across. In other words, they saw these tasks as meaningful. To give an example, I would like to mention one activity. I had my students talk in pairs about their dreams and wishes. During the formal feedback after this activity the students had a question about its purpose. Seven out of nine students answered that it was to get to know their friends better, and only two students wrote that the purpose was to practice grammar (conditional and wish sentences). To put it another way, the students considered this task as an opportunity for communication: they used the language to achieve a communicative goal, not to practice specific language. That's why I think that while working with the TBL tasks I designed the students were involved in meaningful communication.

Another question that I had during formal as well as informal feedback was *Do you think you will use this language in real life? In which situations?* The answer was always 'yes', and the students were pretty clear about when to use this language. It means that the tasks I created were relevant to real life. They had certain features in common with real life communicative events: firstly, there was a purpose to the exchange; secondly, the speakers received immediate feedback from the listeners on whether or not

the message was put across successfully. Finally, as I did not force the students to use any specific language while performing tasks, the students had a choice how to express their ideas. All the above mentioned features (purpose to the exchange, choice and feedback) made my tasks close to real life communication and that's why I can say they were truly communicative.

Keeping a journal showed that most activities I did were opinion-gap activities. The reason is that I try to use more personalized activities, and opinion-gap activities are a good example of them. On the whole, the students were really engaged and involved in these activities: there was a real reason for the students to interact (opinion gap, identifiable outcome), the information they had to transact was interesting, because it was personalized. In fact, the group I worked with liked personalized activities very much. I think the reason is that I have been working with them for a long period of time, so they trust me, and they trust each other. In other words, there is a sense of community in this group, which allows the students to be open and free in talking about their opinions and feelings.

Finally, I would like to discuss the problems I came across while designing and implementing TBL tasks in my classroom. First of all, it was really difficult for me to keep in mind all the elements of a truly communicative TBL task. Sometimes I was so concerned about creating an activity that had all those elements that my preparation for a class turned into ticking off the checklist. What I have learned is that I do not have to be so rigid. The TBL framework can be flexible. Some tasks require a detailed report, especially if every pair or group has a different outcome, other tasks can have a brief

reporting stage, when only one or two groups report in full; others comment and add extra information.

Depending on the needs of students I can devote a different amount of time to the different stages of the task cycle. The students I worked with were pretty good at grammar. They knew the rules but could not apply them while speaking. They needed more speaking practice, so I tried to spend more time on task itself and controlled practice activities after the language focus stage rather than on analyzing language. Controlled practice activities help learners become familiar with the language analyzed. However, according to the principles of TBL such activities can not take the central part of language use and study. To become confident speakers students need to get a chance to process language for communicative purposes. Therefore, the task itself was the main element of my lessons.

I think there can be more variety during the language focus stage. So far I have worked with transcripts and texts in the same way. My students had to look for grammar items such as future forms, modal verbs etc. However, there are other aspects of language that can be highlighted. For example, collocations and lexical phrases, which are usually problematic for second language learners and really important in terms of acquiring both accuracy and fluency. I am going to cover these areas as well.

I also think that once students get used to the methodology, the noticing, i.e., choosing the linguistic features of the input to be highlighted, can become more student-driven. It will be beneficial for students, because they will choose themselves what they want to know more about and that's why they will be motivated to acquire this knowledge. However, it is not possible to work in this way with students who are not

used to the TBL methodology. It will not work, because students need to be trained to be initiative and take more responsibility for their own learning.

Besides extending the aspects of language which are highlighted I feel I need to work on the consciousness-raising activities used at language focus stage. Yet again what I have tried so far was not very diverse. I asked the students to search language forms, identify a particular pattern or usage and then classify the data they had. However, there are a number of other ways of working with samples of language. Willis, D. and J. Willis mention hypothesis building/checking (students make generalizations about language and then check them against more data), cross-language exploration (students compare definite of their native language and English), recall (students recall and reconstruct different parts of a text in order to highlight important features of a text) etc. I could attend to these ideas to vary the operations I ask my students to do while working with texts and transcripts.

Implementing TBL tasks was new for me as well as for my students. Though I was clear why I was doing it, my students did not understand it. This lack of knowledge about the reasons behind what we did in class caused a lot of problems especially at the beginning of the experiment. For example, the students did not understand why they did the task first and then analyzed the language used or that could be used for this task. Some of them even asked me why I had not told them about this language before the task, so I had to explain to them the reasons. And it really worked on a number of levels: firstly, it encouraged the students to use the language they already had, and, secondly, it helped them understand the reasons for what was going on in class.

Initially, there were also problems with planning reports. When I gave the students time to prepare their reports I saw them doing nothing. It did not matter how many times I asked them to think about their reports and rehearse them. They were not willing to do it. To solve this problem, I asked them to take notes while preparing their reports. I also started giving them guidelines, which included the areas of the report they needed to pay close attention to (see an example on p. 6). Only after that the planning started to work.

This experience made me understand that learners need to be aware of what is going on in class especially if some routines are being changed. Knowing the reasons can motivate students and reduce the level of anxiety, and in this way it can contribute to the success of the experiment the teacher is conducting.

To sum up, I would like to mention that the experiment with TBL tasks was interesting for me and for my students. It introduced a new stream to my teaching, which had before then become rather routine. The feedback I got from the students, my own observation and reflection show that my lessons have become more interesting and diverse. My students benefited from it. They got more speaking practice, and their speech has become more fluent. They are more confident speakers now. Of course, they still need a lot of practice, but now I know how I can organize my lessons so that my students get this practice. I feel that the new knowledge and the experience I have will be very useful for further experimenting.

## CONCLUSION

### SUMMARY OF THE MAIN POINTS OF THE PAPER.

In this paper I have attempted to do two main things. First, I have provided a short overview of the main principles of Task-based learning. As my research shows, it has developed as a contrasting approach to Presentation Practice Production lesson framework and has become a powerful influence in current EFL teaching. The emergence of TBL was supported by the change of views on the nature of language teaching and learning, which started to be treated as process-oriented rather than product.

While investigating ESL/EFL source literature I tried to focus mainly on the following questions: *What is a task? How can tasks be implemented? What kinds of tasks promote meaningful communication?* What I have found out is that a task in TBL is defined as an activity which has a purpose for interaction and a tangible outcome, which makes it similar to real-life language use. In other words, being meaning-oriented, tasks in TBL by their nature provide meaningful communication. What is more, they have other characteristics of a truly communicative activity: information/opinion gap between the participants of interaction, choice of language to use, and feedback from listeners.

All the elements mentioned above make TBL tasks really appealing to those teachers who try to employ communicative language teaching and develop communicative competence of their students. At the same time focus on meaning might be a potential drawback of TBL: it can result in the development of fluency at the

expense of accuracy. To avoid this problem a framework for implementing tasks has been developed. It is described by Willis, J.(1996) and Skehan, P. (1996) who distinguish three main stages of the TBL framework: pre-task (introduction to topic and task), task cycle (task and report), and post task (language focus, analysis, and consciousness-raising activities) (See chapter 1.).

In the second part of the paper I have tried to describe and analyze the TBL tasks I developed and implemented in my classroom. There are a number of conclusions I drew from this experience. Firstly, my experience with TBL tasks has led me to conclude that students like working with TBL tasks, because they bring diversity to the classroom, create the element of enjoyment and interest. While doing tasks students use all the language they have; they do not just construct correct sentences but communicate in foreign language, that's why using tasks is really motivating. However, like anything new implementing TBL framework can cause problems, because students might not understand what is going on in class. Therefore being explicit about the expectations the teacher has for the students is the key to success.

Secondly, after experimenting with the tasks I have come to the conclusion that the pre-task stage is a very important element of the TBL framework. It is really difficult to undervalue it in terms of creating the necessary conditions for better quality language use during the task stage. It raises students' interest, motivates them and prepares them for the task by letting them recall the relevant language.

My another insight into TBL, which has arisen after reflecting on my lessons, is the necessity of carefully structured planning and report stage. Planning time affects the quality of students' speech, but to use it efficiently students need to be trained. In this

connection, the teacher should provide some guidelines which help students focus their attention and spend the planning time more productively.

As for report, Skehan, P. (1996) argues that it is a way to avoid the development of fluency at the expense of accuracy. Knowing that they will have to speak in front of the audience, students start thinking about the language they are using, seek for advice and correction. Report stage challenges students and that's why develops their interlanguage system. However, the teacher needs to be careful with setting up the report stage: if students do not have a reason for listening to each other, or if they repeat the same information again and again, the report stage will turn into the most tedious part of a lesson and will not be of any use for students. Students will neither listen to each other nor will they care about what they are saying and how.

When I started experimenting with the TBL framework it seemed to me firmly fixed. So I tried to follow it and repeated the same routines over and over again. However, my further readings as well as own experience with TBL tasks made me change my opinion and understand that there is an element of flexibility within the TBL framework. Depending on students' needs the teacher can devote different amount of time to the different stages of the task cycle, employ a variety of consciousness-raising activities, and choose different aspects of language to be highlighted.

Finally, I would like to mention a point about structured practice activities – activities which usually follow analysis and give students a chance to get a feel for the correct structure before they actually start using it in a task environment. At first, I did not value these activities too much, because I thought they were unnecessary and even contradicting the main principle of TBL, which is using language for communicative



purpose, not for practicing a target language form. The result was that students were reluctant to use highlighted language while repeating a similar oral task. To become more confident with this language they needed some structured practice.

What I understood is that TBL framework has a place for such activities, especially, in cases of new language: they prepare learners for communicative tasks which are the central part of the TBL cycle.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE PROJECT

The present project was a small-scale classroom study done with one group of 12 teenage students. All the TBL tasks I created, implemented and described in this paper were tried once with this group of students. That's why it inevitably raises a lot of questions, and the first is *What would the observations be like if I tried these tasks with a different group of students?* Another question I have in mind is *How would TBL work with a group of lower level students?* The students I work with were at intermediate level, which means they actually knew at least in theory the areas of language I drew their attention to. Even if they did not know they still could fulfill the task using the language they already had. What I wonder is if this framework works with elementary students who have very limited language, and if yes, then how it works.

During this project I mainly focused on grammar. All the tasks I created aimed at teaching and practicing different grammar areas. There are several reasons for my choice. First of all, Task-based learning evolved as a contrasting approach to Presentation Practice Production lesson framework, which I associated with teaching grammar. That's why at the beginning of the project I was mostly interested in how TBL treats grammar.

Another reason is that grammar is traditionally seen as the central part of the teaching/learning process in our country. Though I tried to pay attention on other areas of language and develop all four skills, initially my main interest was on diversifying the methods and techniques of teaching grammar.

Finally, I thought that as my objective was to help my students develop spoken fluency the right thing to do was to improve their grammar. There is no doubt that grammar affects fluency, but it is not the only thing. In particular, the knowledge of collocations and different fixed phrases can be the key to developing fluency. Using these prefabricated chunks makes the process of producing utterances faster and much easier. That's why in the future I am going to focus on teaching these areas of language using the TBL framework.

Most of the limitations mentioned above were due to the fact that practical part of the project continued only for 4 months (this is the standard duration of one level at our school). However, despite the relatively short period of time, I could notice the change in my students. They have become more confident speakers; the fluency as well as accuracy of their speech has improved. As for the limitations of the project, they indicate the possible ways of organizing the future research on TBL.

## TEACHING IMPLICATIONS

What implications does this research have? The first chapter providing the overview of Task-based learning can be used as a theoretical basis for implementing TBL framework in class. The second chapter containing my observations and findings can be used for further experimenting with TBL.

My experience showed that there are a number of points teachers implementing TBL framework need to attend to. First, while designing tasks they have to keep in mind that every task must have a purpose for interaction and a tangible outcome. Quite often teachers put students in pairs or small groups and give a task hoping that students will start interacting with each other. What happens is that students either start working individually or let one bright student do all the work. Tasks set in this way have nothing to do with developing spoken skills.

To avoid the problem mentioned above, teachers need to remember that there should be a reason, i.e., purpose for students to talk to each other. It can be achieved through creating information/opinion gap between the participants of interaction. In this way in order to complete the task students will have to speak to each other. As for tangible outcome, it makes tasks similar to real life language use; besides it directs students, keeps their attention centered on the task, and creates a basis for feedback.

Another point worth mentioning is the choice of language. This is a really important concept of TBL. The teacher can not limit or choose the language learners use

while performing a task. The aim is to provide an opportunity to use the language students have. On the other hand, it does not mean the teacher can not feed in useful language. It can be done before the task or after the task in the feedback stage. The important thing here is to remember that students are free to use this language or not, because the main focus is on meaning not on language.

In this paper it has been said a lot about the danger of developing fluency at the expense of accuracy. As it was mentioned in Chapter 1, some students are so obsessed with achieving the outcome of the task that they get used to using unchallenging or inaccurate language. The result is that their speech becomes fluent but inaccurate. The teacher trying TBL tasks needs to be constantly aware of this potential problem; and in order to avoid it she needs to follow the TBL framework which was described in detail in Chapter 1.

Tasks themselves are the central part of the TBL framework. They provide a natural opportunity for revision and recycling, and help students build up confidence in using the target language. Nevertheless, tasks are not sufficient on their own. Other elements of the TBL framework such as pre-task, planning and report stage, analysis and practice which includes structured-practice activities, also carry out important functions.

Every part of the TBL framework plays its own role; pre-task prepares students for the task, helps them recall relevant language; planning and report stage encourages students to raise their game and use the best language they can; analysis, which follows tasks, provides some language focused work based on the task students have completed, and aims at extending students' interlanguage systems; finally, structured-practice activities, which can include sentence completion, matching, and different games, give

learners a chance to become more confident with the language analyzed and in this way create conditions for students' using this language in the next task.

While preparing a TBL lesson the teacher needs to keep in mind all the above mentioned elements and think how she is going to set every part of the TBL framework. However, it does not mean that the teacher is not free within the framework. My own experience showed that depending on students' needs the teacher can spend a different amount of time on different parts of the framework, choose different arias of the language for the language analysis stage, and decide on the number and type of structured-practice activities.

To conclude, anyone trying to introduce their students to Task-based learning needs to be ready to come across the misunderstanding on their part. Students might not want to change the routines, because they feel safe while working in a habitual way. That's why like anything new TBL needs to be explained and discussed. In this respect, being alive to what goes on in the classroom and keeping students informed about the reasons behind the changes is the key to success.

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