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Language Instruction Support and Training Network

Task-Based Instruction | Instructors' Bulletin

Task-Based Instruction in LINC

Task-based instruction (TBI), when applied according to a cycle, can turn regular language learning activities into meaningful practice of real life scenarios. In Canada, the nation-wide Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program, which follows the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB), has its curricula centered on 12 levels of "communicative competencies and performance tasks through which learners demonstrate application of language knowledge (i.e., competence) and skill (i.e., ability)" (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2012, p. v). As tasks are central to the CLB, ... a simplified, pragmatic form of TBI can be incorporated into the classroom, both within a LINC context and beyond.

Shawna Williams, IRC at LISTN, presented "Task-Based Instruction: Building Bridges from Class-room to Real Life" at the TESOL International Convention in Toronto in March 2015. Read about her presentation here.

What is Task-Based Instruction?

Task-based Instruction (TBI) may also be referred to as Task--based Language Teaching (TBLT) and sometimes Task-based Learning (TBL). While the names are different, many of the pedagogical considerations are the same.

   "TBLT is an approach to teaching a second/ foreign language that seeks to engage learners in interactionally authentic language use by having them perform a series of tasks. It aims to both enable learners (1) to acquire new linguistic knowledge and (2) to proceduralize their existing knowledge by treating language as a tool for making meaning rather than as an object to study."

(Ellis, 2003)

What is a task?

There are many definitions of 'task' as it relates to the language classroom. Here are three from the literature:

"a communicative 'real world' instance of language use to accomplish a specific purpose in a particular context" (CCLB, 2012, p. ix);

"a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form. "(Nunan, 2004, p. 4)

An activity "where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome". (Willis, 1996, p. 23)

Ellis (2009) suggests that for "a language-teaching activity to be a 'task' it must satisfy the following criteria:

1. The primary focus should be on 'meaning' (by which is meant that learners should be mainly concerned with processing the semantic and pragmatic meaning of utterances).
2. There should be some kind of 'gap' (i.e. a need to convey information, to express an opinion or to infer meaning).
3. Learners should largely have to rely on their own resources (linguistic and non-linguistic) in order to complete the activity.
4. There is a clearly defined outcome other than the use of language (i.e. the language serves as the means for achieving the outcome, not as an end in its own right).
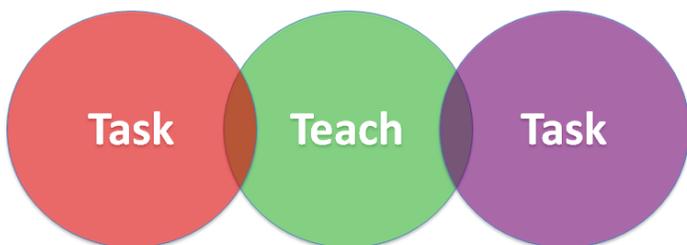
(Ellis, 2009, p. 223)

References

Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based language learning and teaching.* New York: Oxford University Press

Ellis, R. (2009). Task-based language teaching: Sorting out the misunder standings. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics, 19*(3), 221-246.

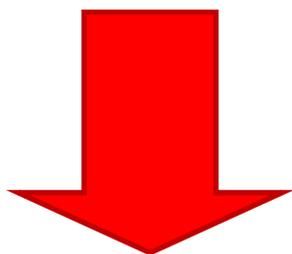Nunan, D. (2004). *Task-based language teaching. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.*

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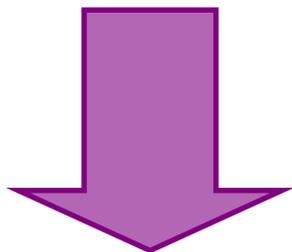
Task-Teach-Task

Kathryn Rockwell and Shawna Williams, IRCs at LISTN, have devised a simplified form of TBI called "Task-Teach-Task".

Task: T leads in with the first "Task" for diagnostic and learner self-assessment purposes; e.g., Ss write an email to their child's teacher as thanks for coaching the basketball team.

Teach Ss level of success in doing the task allows T to determine which elements should be included in the "Teach" (i.e., language focus) phase to ensure more successful completion of the same or similar task.; e.g., how to write an email; suitable subject lines; openings and closings; past tense.

Task: Finally, the teacher ends the cycle with a final "Task" phase, using the same or a similar task, to check if the task is completed more successfully and to give students tangible evidence of their learning; e.g., Ss send a thank you email to a neighbour for watering the garden.

7 Principles of TBI

Nunan (2004) outlines seven principles of task-based language instruction, summarized below.

Principle 1: Scaffolding

- Lessons and materials should provide supporting frameworks within which the learning takes place. At the beginning of the learning process, learners should not be expected to produce language that has not been introduced either explicitly or implicitly.

Principle 2: Task dependency

- Within a lesson, one task should grow out of, and build upon, the ones that have gone before.

Principle 3: Recycling

- Recycling language maximizes opportunities for learning and activates the 'organic' learning principle.

Principle 4: Active learning

- Learners learn best by actively using the language they are learning.

Principle 5: Integration

- Learners should be taught in ways that make clear the relationships between linguistic form, communicative function and semantic meaning.

Principle 6: Reproduction to creation

- Learners should be encouraged to move from reproductive to creative language use.

Principle 7: Reflection

- Leaners should be given opportunities to reflect on what they have learned and how well they are doing.

Nunan (2004), pp. 35-38.

Further Reading

"Task-Based Instruction" by Li-Shih Huang in the Spring 2011 issue of *TEAL News*, is a short, accessible article on this topic. Click here and scroll to pages 9-11.