Aspects of tasks

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This chapter explores what we mean by tasks in task-based learning (TBL) and looks at different aspects of their use. We include an overview of task types and illustrate a range of materials tasks can be based on.

We then turn to language use in the task cycle. We identify differences between spontaneous spoken language and planned written or spoken language, arguing that learners need to recognise and practise both types. We ask how far the language of a particular task can be predicted.

Finally, we summarise the learning opportunities that TBL offers students.

2.1 Defining tasks

In some books, the word ‘task’ has been used as a label for various activities including grammar exercises, practice activities and role plays. As I shall show in this section, these are not tasks in the sense the word is used here.

In this book tasks are always activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome.

2.1.1 Goals and outcomes

The sample tasks in Focus 2 arise out of three different topics. Any topic can give rise to a wide variety of tasks. One job of the course designer and teacher is to select topics and tasks that will motivate learners, engage their attention, present a suitable degree of intellectual and linguistic challenge and promote their language development as efficiently as possible.
You will notice that all the tasks illustrated have a specified objective that must be achieved, often in a given time. They are ‘goal-oriented’. In other words, the emphasis is on understanding and conveying meanings in order to complete the task successfully. While learners are doing tasks, they are using language in a meaningful way.

All tasks should have an outcome. For example, outcomes of some of the sample tasks in Focus 2 would be the completed family survey, the final version of the family tree and the identification of the best-remembered person in the photograph.

The outcome can be further built on at a later stage in the task cycle, for example, by extending the pairs family survey to the whole class to discover how many families are predominantly male or female.

It is the challenge of achieving the outcome that makes TBL a motivating procedure in the classroom.

An example of an activity that lacks an outcome would be to show students a picture and say Write four sentences describing the picture. Say them to your partner. Here, there is no communicative purpose, only the practice of language form.

It is often possible, though, to redesign an activity without an outcome so that it has one. In the above example, if the picture is shown briefly to the students then concealed, the task could be: From memory, write four true things and two false things about the picture. Read them out to see if other pairs remember which are true. The students would be thinking of things they could remember, (especially things that other pairs might have forgotten!) and working out how best to express them to challenge the memories of the other pairs. To achieve this outcome they would be focusing first on meaning, and then on the best ways to express that meaning linguistically.

2.1.2 Meaning before form

An important feature of TBL is that learners are free to choose whatever language forms they wish to convey what they mean, in order to fulfil, as well as they can, the task goals.

It would defeat the purpose to dictate or control the language forms that they must use. As the need arises, words and phrases acquired previously but as yet unused will often spring to mind. If the need to communicate is strongly felt, learners will find a way of getting round words or forms they do not yet know or cannot remember. If, for example, learners at a very elementary level want to express something that happened in the past, they can use the base form of the verb, and an adverb denoting past time, like I go yesterday. Last week you say...

The teacher can monitor from a distance, and, especially in a monolingual class, should encourage all attempts to communicate in the target language. But this is not the time for advice or correction. Learners need to feel free to experiment with language on their own, and to take risks. Fluency in communication is what counts. In later stages of the task framework accuracy does matter, but it is not so important at the task stage.

Learners need to regard their errors in a positive way, to treat them as a normal part of learning. Explain to them that it is better for them to risk getting something wrong, than not to say anything. If their message is understood, then they have been reasonably successful. If they remain silent, they are less likely to learn. All learners need to experiment and make errors.
Language then, is the vehicle for attaining task goals, but the emphasis is on meaning and communication, not on producing language forms correctly.

We will now look at two activities and evaluate them as tasks in the TBL sense.

**Controlled language practice**

A controlled practice activity involving repetition of target patterns is not a task, even if this is done in pairs. For example, in activities like: *Change the verb forms from present simple to past simple* or *In pairs, ask and answer questions using 'Do you like ...?'* 'Yes, I do/No, I don’t', the emphasis is closely focused on getting students to produce the right forms. Meaning is of secondary importance.

**Role plays**

The term ‘role play’ includes a wide range of activities, some of which do have outcomes to achieve, some of which do not.

Some role plays are actually problem-solving tasks. In a business simulation based on a case study, where a team of people each take the point of view of a company employee and argue their case to solve a problem, they would genuinely be trying to convince one another. The outcome would be the solution of the problem. This counts as a task.

Similarly a shopping game, where students play the roles of shopkeepers and customers, can have an outcome. Customers must buy the things on their ‘shopping lists’, keeping within a set budget. Shopkeepers must try to be the first to sell out of goods, but also to make a profit. This is likely to involve bargaining sequences where students really do mean what they say, as they try to succeed in the task. Here again there is an outcome for each side to achieve.

However, there are other role plays where students are simply acting out pre-defined roles with no purpose other than to practise specified language forms. These are not tasks. While acting, students are unlikely to be meaning what they say. And if there is no outcome to achieve, they have no real reason to set themselves goals of trying to convince someone or explaining something fully. There is no challenge – they can simply avoid confronting linguistic problems and concede the argument without suffering penalties.

Recordings of classes where students are preparing and performing this kind of role play show that there is often far more real communication at the planning and rehearsal stages, especially where students with the same role are put together in groups to plan their strategies, than during the role play itself.¹

Some approaches to language teaching talk in terms of four separate skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Skills lessons are principally designed to improve one single skill and often supplement grammar teaching. Other approaches talk in terms of integrated skills. With the exception of reading or listening for pleasure, it is rare for anyone to use one skill in isolation for any length of time. If you are talking to someone you will be both observing their reactions and listening for their responses; as you listen to them, you’ll be composing what you want to say next. Writing usually involves reading, checking and often revising what you have written.

Teachers following a task-based cycle naturally foster combinations of skills depending upon the task. The skills form an integral part of the process of achieving the task goals; they are not being practised singly, in a vacuum.
The task objectives ensure there is always a purpose for any reading and note-taking, just as there is always an audience for the speaking and writing. Carrying out a task demands meaningful interaction of some kind.

If you are aware of your learners’ current or future language needs, you can select or adapt tasks that help them to practise relevant skills. Some learners may need English for academic purposes, so tasks involving reading and listening, note-taking and summarising are bound to be helpful. Some students may need translating or oral interpreting skills and tasks can be devised to practise these, for example, hearing a news item in one language and comparing it with a news summary in the other. For those who need only to pass a written examination, but also want to socialise in the target language, you could use text-based tasks with written outcomes, and discussion at various points in the task cycle.

2.2 Varieties of task

Whereas Focus 2 illustrates how individual topics can be exploited to give rise to many different tasks, Appendix A sets out six main types of task that could be adapted for use with almost any topic. For each type, examples of topics or themes are given. You could, for example, keep to the topic in the coursebook, and go through the list of task types to see if any are appropriate. For beginners, select a simple task type that involves only one or two processes (see Chapter 8 for examples).

All types of task can involve reading as well as speaking, and many lead naturally into a writing phase. There are more examples of text-based tasks in Chapter 5.

2.2.1 Six types of task

We shall briefly now introduce each type. For more details and examples, please read the following section in conjunction with Appendix A. Numbered tasks are those shown in Focus 2.

1 Listing

Listing may seem unimaginative, but in practice, listing tasks tend to generate a lot of talk as learners explain their ideas. In Focus 2, tasks 1, 2, 3, 5 and 8 involve listing at some stage.

The processes involved are:

- brainstorming, in which learners draw on their own knowledge and experience either as a class or in pairs/groups
- fact-finding, in which learners find things out by asking each other or other people and referring to books, etc.

The outcome would be the completed list, or possibly a draft mind map.

2 Ordering and sorting

These tasks involve four main processes:

- sequencing items, actions or events in a logical or chronological order
- ranking items according to personal values or specified criteria (Tasks 8 and 9)
- categorising items in given groups or grouping them under given headings (Task 2)
- classifying items in different ways, where the categories themselves are not given (Task 4).
3 Comparing

Broadly, these tasks involve comparing information of a similar nature but from different sources or versions in order to identify common points and/or differences (Task 7). The processes involved are:

- matching to identify specific points and relate them to each other (end of Task 3)
- finding similarities and things in common (Tasks 5 and 6)
- finding differences

4 Problem solving

Problem-solving tasks make demands upon people’s intellectual and reasoning powers, and, though challenging, they are engaging and often satisfying to solve. The processes and time scale will vary enormously depending on the type and complexity of the problem.

The classification in Appendix A starts with short puzzles such as logic problems. Real-life problems may involve expressing hypotheses, describing experiences, comparing alternatives and evaluating and agreeing a solution. Completion tasks are often based on short extracts from texts, where the learners predict the ending or piece together clues to guess it. The classification ends with case studies, which are more complex, entail an in-depth consideration of many criteria, and often involve additional fact-finding and investigating, as in Task 9.

5 Sharing personal experiences

These tasks encourage learners to talk more freely about themselves and share their experiences with others. The resulting interaction is closer to casual social conversation in that it is not so directly goal-oriented as in other tasks. For that very reason, however, these open tasks may be more difficult to get going in the classroom. Section 2.2.2 below discusses their value more fully. In Focus 2, Tasks 6, 7 and possibly 8 may well include some social personal talk.

6 Creative tasks

These are often called projects and involve pairs or groups of learners in some kind of freer creative work. They also tend to have more stages than other tasks, and can involve combinations of task types: listing, ordering and sorting, comparing and problem solving. Out-of-class research is sometimes needed. Organisational skills and teamwork are important in getting the task done. The outcome can often be appreciated by a wider audience than the students who produced it.

The classification in Appendix A starts with children’s activities such as model making, and goes on to ideas for creative writing. Social and historical research and media projects may be longer-term tasks spread over a whole day or done in short spells over some weeks.²

In real-life rehearsals pairs or groups of students predict, plan and rehearse what they could say in typical real-life situations (e.g. buying stamps). They then perform their dialogue in front of the class, and/or record it. Next, they either hear a recording of a real-life parallel dialogue, or, if they are in an English-speaking area, they go to the place (e.g. the post office) and take notes of what people actually say. If possible, they also take part in a similar
situation themselves (e.g. buy the stamps) with another student taking
notes. Finally, students compare the real-life versions with their own prepared
scripts.

2.2.2 Closed and open tasks

Closed tasks are ones that are highly structured and have very specific goals, for
example, Work in pairs to find seven differences between these two pictures and write
them down in note form. Time limit: two minutes. These instructions are very precise
and the information is restricted. There is only one possible outcome, and one
way of achieving it. Most comparing tasks are like this.

Open tasks are ones that are more loosely structured, with a less specific goal,
for example, comparing memories of childhood journeys, or exchanging
anecdotes on a theme.

Other types of task come midway between closed and open. Logic problems
usually have a specific goal and one answer or outcome, but learners have
different ways of getting there. Ranking tasks and real-life problem-solving tasks
have specific goals, too (e.g. to agree on a prioritised list or on a solution), but
each pair’s outcome might be different, and there will be alternative ways of
reaching it.

Open, creative tasks can still have an outcome for students to achieve. This
could be to listen to each other’s anecdotes and then decide which one was the
most frightening or dramatic. Because the range of learners’ experience is so
wide, and the choice of anecdote is entirely up to them, the precise outcomes will
be less predictable.

Generally speaking, the more specific the goals, the easier it is for students to
evaluate their success and the more likely they are to get involved with the task
and work independently. It is often the goal and outcome that provide the
motivation for students to engage in the task, which then becomes for them a
learning opportunity.

However, we must not forget that much interaction outside the classroom is
not so directly goal oriented. In real life, people often talk just to get to know
someone better, or to pass the time of day – there is a far greater proportion of
experiential, interpersonal and open ended talk. Our ultimate aim is to prepare
students for this.

Tasks with specific goals are good ways of encouraging students to interact in
the target language in the language classroom. If, however, some groups of
learners begin to talk naturally amongst themselves in the target language even
if they are digressing from the task goals, we should do everything we can to
courage it. If students are still working on a task, using the target language,
long after the time limit you set, let them be. Their language development is more
important than your lesson plan.

2.2.3 Starting points for tasks

This section gives a general overview of five possible starting points.
Combinations of these can also be used.

*Personal knowledge and experience*

Many tasks are based primarily on the learner’s personal and professional
experience and knowledge of the world. Most of the tasks illustrated in Focus 2
come into this category. The exceptions are Task 9 where starting-point data is
given, and 4 and 8 which start from lists. With a group learning for a specific
purpose, (e.g. hotel reception skills), tasks can be based on their professional knowledge and experience.

Problems
Here the starting point is normally the statement of the problem. Students are likely to engage better in the task and interact more confidently if they have had a few minutes' individual thinking time before they come together to discuss possible solutions.

Many tasks can be made more challenging by introducing constraints. These can be given at the beginning or, occasionally, to raise the degree of challenge and spontaneity, announced half-way through.

Visual stimuli
Tasks can be based on pictures, photographs, tables or graphs, e.g. Tasks 3 and 9 in Focus 2. Pictures can be used as a basis for ‘Spot the difference’ games. Initially pairs can work together to spot and describe the differences. Later, each person only sees one picture and they have to describe their picture to each other to find the differences.

A

B

Find seven differences. (Collins Cobuild English Course Level 1)

For elementary students, games like ‘Describe and arrange’ and ‘Describe and draw’ can be done with the teacher describing while students arrange or draw pictures. A more challenging task is to give students three or four pictures from a magazine: one of a person, one of a place and one of an object, and challenge them to develop a story-line that links them all. The outcome arises out of the comparisons of the various story-lines. Individual planning time is recommended for all tasks such as this one that require imagination.

Real objects can be useful too, for example, twelve objects on a tray which learners have 15 or 20 seconds to try to memorise, makes the popular memory challenge, ‘Kim’s Game’.

Short video sequences, shown without the sound track with pauses every few seconds, can stimulate a lot of speculation and prediction. A ten-second video extract, preferably with some action (shown with or without the sound track), can be used as a memory challenge. Ask students, after they have seen it just once, to recall and list the actions they saw, in the right order. They then tell each other what they remembered. (They might even argue about whose order is
correct, but the teacher must not be tempted to say who is right!). Their answers are checked by watching the extract again.

**Spoken and written texts**

Recordings of spoken English, extracts from video recordings and reading texts can also make good task material. Some EFL books make a clear distinction between ‘listening comprehension’ and ‘reading comprehension’ activities but most types of task can be done with either spoken or written text, or a mix of both (see Chapter 5). Selected examples follow:

- Learners read or listen to the first part of a story; are given a few additional clues and are asked to discuss and write an ending.
- Learners spot differences between an original news item (written or on an audio or video recording) and a written summary of it containing one or two factual inaccuracies.
- Learners spot differences between a written story and a version read aloud by the teacher with some of the events in a slightly different order.

In order to complete the goals in all these tasks, students are reacting to the content and processing the text for meaning.

**Children’s activities**

Action games, miming and guessing, and even livelier playground games like hopscotch and ball games are all popular and effective with younger learners (see Chapter 8). Children enjoy making things, drawing and colouring, practising magic tricks, preparing snacks, and doing simple science experiments. If the instructions are available only in the target language, and the necessary materials can only be obtained if they ask in the target language, such activities stimulate a natural need to understand and use it. Many can be broken down into smaller stages, forming a series of tasks, each enriched with teacher talk in the target language. A review or report afterwards (e.g. on a wall poster) will stimulate a different variety of target language use.

**Combinations of starting points**

Combinations of two or more starting points: text and personal experience, for example, are especially useful in some cases. A questionnaire could deal with a controversial topic. Students would read the statements, then discuss each one, saying whether they agree or disagree and giving evidence from their own experience. The questionnaire format gives a clear step-by-step agenda to the task, thus making it easier to complete satisfactorily.

Other tasks (e.g. 3 and 9 in Focus 2) can be based on a combination of visual data (photographs, graphs and diagrams) and personal or professional experience, while problem-solving tasks are often based on a written text, in combination with a map, chart or table of some kind.

**2.3 Language use in tasks**

Tasks provide opportunities for free and meaningful use of the target language, and thus fulfil one of the key conditions of learning. But what kind of language can we expect of learners doing tasks? Unfortunately, we are so used to working with written language, that we often do not realise what spoken language is actually like. This is because it happens fast, and we don’t normally see it written down. All too often learners think they need to speak in full sentences. But do
we, in fact, compose spontaneous speech in sentences? And what are the differences between spontaneous spoken language and written language? The next section attempts to answer some of these questions.

2.3.1 Spontaneous language

Let us look now at two tasks, one open and one closed, that were done, spontaneously, by native-speakers, recorded and then transcribed.⁴

A is an extract from an open task where Rachel and Chris are comparing experiences of sea journeys. B is from a closed task; David and Bridget are playing a ‘Spot the difference’ game co-operatively, i.e. both can see both pictures, and David is writing down the differences they find to make a key for another pair. The pictures for this task were in Section 2.2.3 above.

A

Chris: Are you a good sailor? Have you ever been seasick?
Rachel: Yeah I have been seasick, once. But I haven’t sailed very much. Except in a –
Chris: Was that on a long journey?
Rachel: Yeah. In fact I’m quite a good traveller normally. But this was erm – er – not on a long journey, no. It was about twenty miles. And erm, coming – on the way back, it was a very small boat, and it was very hot, and me and the rest of my family were on this very – in the inside of the boat. And it was just like being in a – on a cork, carried by the water. And my brother started first, and then it just sort of spread like the plague.

Chris: Oh terrible.
Rachel: It was ghastly.

B

David: Okay. Another difference is the number of the house…
Bridget: Yes.
David: In Picture A it’s thirty; in Picture B it’s thirteen…
Bridget: — is thirty. Oh!
David: Oh, okay.
Bridget: Oh. Do you think—?
David: Doesn’t matter. Thirty in Picture A and thirteen…
Bridget: Thirteen in picture B. And this number’s different.
David: What number?
Bridget: The phone number of Paul Smith and Sons.
David: Oh yeah. So, the phone number of Paul Smith and Sons is — what? — in Picture A — is six three one nine oh. Six three one nine oh in Picture A…
Bridget: Mmm.
David: And six three three nine oh in Picture B.
Bridget: Okay.
David: Okay. How many have we got? That’s three.
Bridget: Three. How many do we have to have? Seven. Mm.
David: How about the television — is that on? Yes. Oh no, the television is on, is it? — in the first picture—
Bridget: Yes, it is!
David: … and it’s not on in the — in Picture B… that’s — what have we got?
Bridget: The television is on in Picture A but off in Picture B.
David: Okay. Right. Anything else? Oh yes, the man’s carrying an umbrella.
Bridget: Okay.
David: So what shall we put? The man...

If you look carefully through the transcriptions, you should be able to find examples of the following features:

- evidence of real-time composing, e.g. unfinished utterances, back-tracking, repetition, use of err... er...
- linking devices and signal words that mark stages in the discourse, e.g. in the Sea Journey account, in fact, but, and six occurrences of and. In the puzzle, words like right, so, often start a new exchange.
- follow-up words, e.g. Yeah, Oh, Mm, Okay, which acknowledge that the message has been understood.
- final evaluation, e.g. Chris: Oh terrible. Rachel: It was ghastly. Stories and anecdotes, both written and spoken, normally end with an evaluative comment, and such pairs of adjectives are typical.
- phrases with no subjects, e.g. Not on a long journey. no. Other common examples are: Doesn't matter. Don't know... Makes me think...
- questions without verbs, e.g. Okay? What number? How about the television? Anything else? Other questions that occur later in the same interaction include: Of what? What? All right? In the complete game interaction, of the twenty utterances that function as questions, there are ten with no verb. In written language, these would be considered ungrammatical, but in spoken language, like phrases with no subjects, they are perfectly normal and acceptable.
- lexical phrases that seem to be whole units, e.g. in fact, on the way back, me and the rest of my family, spread like the plague.

Some lexical phrases like in fact, of course, spread like the plague, are fixed phrases which rarely change. Some allow variation: on the way back/here. Others like How about the...? Do you think...? can be completed in many ways.\(^5\)

The important thing about lexical phrases is that they come mid way between lexis and grammar. Often learners will naturally acquire such phrases as fixed chunks, then realise later how they are made up. They are commonly stored in the mind as whole units. When speaking spontaneously, we compose in real time and often resort to lexical phrases, rather than building complete sentences word by word.\(^6\) It follows that we should not expect students to speak in full sentences when doing tasks in small groups. This would be rather like trying to speak written English – something even native speakers would find very difficult.

While not advocating that students should be explicitly taught features such as back-tracking and half-completed utterances, they should have chances to listen to, use and study them given their need to be able to understand spontaneous speech. They should also learn to recognise useful lexical phrases. We are showing them that even fluent speakers do not speak in whole perfectly-formed grammatical sentences; and that it doesn't matter if they don't either. In the classroom, there is also a tendency to ask learners to be verbally explicit about things that are already shared knowledge. This is unnatural language behaviour. Where both speakers can see each other, there is sometimes no need to be verbally explicit – they understand each other by looks and gestures. In our classes, we need to set realistic standards that are attainable and reproduce normal conditions of language use.\(^7\)
2.3.2 Planned language

It is vital that tasks should expose learners to spontaneous language in appropriate circumstances, and allow them to use it, since most will need to cope with it in real life. However, it is also vital to offer learners opportunities to ‘upgrade’ their task language to a version suitable for presenting in public and reflect on the changes that need to be made. Research into planned language shows that this is likely to be lexically richer and syntactically more complex. (We have more time to think of better words, and organise our ideas more coherently.) For example, if Rachel had to retell her story to a larger audience in a more formal setting, her planned version would probably sound more like this:

Rachel: I’m quite a good sailor normally. But this time, I was with my family and we were on a very small boat and it was like being on a cork on the water. We were all sitting inside the cabin and it was really hot. My brother started being seasick first and then it just spread like the plague. It was ghastly.

In private circumstances, then, with one or two friends, you are likely to talk spontaneously, exploring ideas and ways of getting your message across. Your listeners will recall the content of what you say, but the way you said it is unlikely to stay in their minds – it is ephemeral.

On the other hand, if you are speaking to a larger audience, or writing for someone other than a close friend or family member, it is natural to plan what you are going to say or write. Also, if what you write is going to be published, or what you say will be recorded on audio or video (in other words, made permanent in some way), you will spend even longer thinking about it, trying to make it perfect. So the more public, or more permanent, the circumstances of communication are, the more likely we are to aim at a clear, accurate and well-organised presentation.

The distinction between the two extremes of spontaneous and planned language is summarised below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Private (or equal status)</th>
<th>Public (or high status)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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</tr>
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</tr>
</tbody>
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Learners need opportunities to use the whole range of language between these two extremes. The three components of the task cycle cater for this need (see Chapter 4).

2.3.3 Predicting language forms

Although it may be possible, with experience, to predict some of the forms that may occur in closed tasks, in more open tasks, it is virtually impossible to do so.

Much of the language used in closed tasks will be transactional in nature; aimed at getting things done, like borrowing, buying, or following instructions. Some well-rehearsed formulae, e.g. Can I have a...? What about the ...? may be sufficient for learners’ basic needs (and all they can hope for if they are on a two-week survival course) but most will want to do far more with language than this. Matching tasks and games like ‘Spot the difference’ are also fairly predictable in terms of the basic language needed. Has the woman/man in your picture got a...?
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Is there a ... in your picture? are typical questions if the speakers cannot see each other’s pictures.

However, the interactional side of closed tasks is rarely so predictable. In real life, all kinds of social talk will occur, some relevant to the transaction, like discussing rules, and some quite peripheral, like gossip or personal anecdotes. This interactional language is nevertheless important for establishing social relations in and outside the classroom, and, as we said earlier, should be encouraged.

Once the task or any single element of it is slightly more open, it becomes harder to predict which grammatical structures will occur naturally and with any frequency. As we saw in the last section, spontaneous language use is a far cry from the carefully constructed textbook dialogues of former years, where a whole conversation was made up almost entirely of two or three distinct grammatical structures. From the task objectives, you may be able to predict broad areas of language use, e.g. whether speakers will be talking about the past, present or future, but there are surprises, even then. The best way to make such a prediction is to record several pairs of fluent speakers doing the task (see Chapter 6) and play back the recordings several times, observing what they have in common.

I tried this for the first time in the early 1980s when I was working in Singapore. I was planning a lesson on the topic of giving advice to holiday travellers. It was just before the mid-year break, and I asked someone who knew Thailand well to give advice to a colleague who was about to go there for the first time on holiday. I set a time limit and recorded their conversation. I expected the standard advice-giving phrases such as If I were you, I'd ..., What about ... ?, Why don't you ... ? and talk about future plans. But when I played back the recording, I found that not one of those standard phrases was used, and most of the interaction was in the past, mingled with the present: Well, when I went to Bangkok last I stayed at the Grace Hotel, and that was good value, though a bit noisy. [...] And another good place was Chaeng Mai. [...] You get this bus – well it’s more like a jeep thing – right up into the hill villages... Oh, and the thing to do is...

Since then, I have listened carefully to many English speakers giving advice and have observed that we rarely use the standard phrases that appear in language coursebooks for this kind of situation. Why then should we predict our learners will?

Can we, then, go any way towards identifying the language our students need for particular tasks? The only safe way is to listen to them planning and doing the tasks and find out what meanings they want to convey. These will depend largely on the type of task and the learners themselves. As individuals with different experiences and opinions, they will probably have different things to say. They might also use different approaches to topics and tasks, especially the problem-solving type. They could well be at different stages of language development, too.

It is better, therefore, to let learners do the task first, using their own linguistic resources, and then study the language that fluent or native speakers typically use in the task situation. The final part of the task framework builds on this principle (see Chapters 6 and 7).
2.4 Learning from tasks

Learners who are not used to TBL may not at first realise what its advantages are and take some time to understand what is required of them and be persuaded of the benefits (see 9.2).

Here, for example, are some comments from secondary level students aged around 15 who have just started doing some speaking tasks for the first time.9

![Box 1](image1)

To work in group is good because everybody helps. We talk, try to be the best, correct the mistakes.

![Box 2](image2)

The group working is good. I'm with friends I like. We talk and sometimes I make a mistake. My friend corrects it.

![Box 3](image3)

Working in group is good. I have fun. We discuss something, we do things together. I like it.

![Box 4](image4)

It's fun you talk about something. You learn new things. You are with your good friends.

I like group work but sometimes my friend talks all the time and not let me talk, then I change group but sometimes same happens.

Source
Research carried out at Boyabat High School, Istanbul, Turkey with elementary learners by Köksal, Aysegül (1993)

From the learner's position, doing a task in pairs or groups has a number of advantages. Bearing them in mind will also guide you in your role as facilitator of learning.

- It gives learners confidence to try out whatever language they know, or think they know, in the relative privacy of a pair or small group, without fear of being wrong or of being corrected in front of the class.
- It gives learners experience of spontaneous interaction, which involves composing what they want to say in real time, formulating phrases and units of meaning, while listening to what is being said.
- It gives learners a chance to benefit from noticing how others express similar meanings. Research shows they are more likely to provide corrective feedback to each other (when encouraged to do so) than adopt each other's errors.10
- It gives all learners chances to practise negotiating turns to speak, initiating as well as responding to questions, and reacting to other's contributions (whereas in teacher-led interaction, they only have a responding role).
- It engages learners in using language purposefully and co-operatively, concentrating on building meaning, not just using language for display purposes.
- It makes learners participate in a complete interaction, not just one-off sentences. Negotiating openings and closings, new stages or changes of direction are their responsibility. It is likely that discourse skills such as these can only be acquired through interaction.
A FRAMEWORK FOR TASK-BASED LEARNING

- It gives learners more chances to try out communication strategies like checking understanding, paraphrasing to get round an unknown word, reformulating other people's ideas, and supplying words and phrases for other speakers.
- It helps learners gradually gain confidence as they find they can rely on co-operation with their fellow students to achieve the goals of the tasks mainly through use of the target language.

2.5 Summary

We first defined what we mean by task: a goal-oriented communicative activity with a specific outcome, where the emphasis is on exchanging meanings not producing specific language forms. We showed how skills practice forms an integral part of achieving task goals. We saw how tasks could be grouped into six types. We made a distinction between closed and open tasks and then considered a variety of starting points for tasks.

From task design we turned to language use in tasks. By analysing transcripts of fluent speakers carrying out tasks, we were able to identify typical features of spontaneous spoken language. We made the point that learners are more familiar with the features of written language, and often feel that they should speak in perfect sentences. But even native speakers talking in real time back-track, hesitate, and compose in short chunks making use of common lexical phrases. We suggested learners should be aware of these features, and also of how planned discourse (spoken or written) may differ.

We then asked how far it was possible to predict language forms that might be used in tasks. Except in closed tasks, we argued that such predictions were unlikely to be accurate, or relevant to learners and the meanings they might wish to convey.

Finally we summarised the learning opportunities that tasks offer.

Material appraisal

1 Classifying tasks

Prabhu classified the tasks that he used in secondary school classes in Bangalore into three categories:

1) Information-gap activities involving a transfer of given information from one person to another, one form to another, or one place to another.
2) Reasoning-gap activities involving the discovery of new information through inference, deduction, practical reasoning, or a perception of relationships or patterns.
3) Opinion-gap activities involving the identification and expression of personal preference or attitude in response to a given situation.

Look through the tasks in Focus 2, or select six tasks of different types from Appendix A, and examine how they would fit into Prabhu’s system.

2 Closed and open tasks – see Focus 2

a) Which two tasks have the most specific goals?

b) Which two tasks allow the participants most freedom in terms of what they could choose to talk about?

c) With elementary learners in mind, decide which are the three easiest tasks. Then put them in rank order, with the easiest one first. Which task (preceded by an introduction or demonstration) might be suitable for near beginners?
3 Lexis

a) Collect as many lexical phrases from spontaneous talk as you can in a week (the language doesn't matter) then compare your list with someone else's.

b) Look up the following words in a good learner’s dictionary, and see how many fixed expressions, lexical phrases or common collocations (e.g. hard luck) you can find (either in the examples, or as separate expressions) for each one.

way thing(s) say hard

4 Predicting task language

Choose a task from Appendix A you could use with your learners. Adapt it if necessary. List the language forms and lexical phrases that might be used. Ask two pairs of fluent speakers to do the task (set a time limit of 2–3 minutes) while you record them. They should not hear each other or see your lists.

Play back the tape and see how many of the items on your list were actually used by both pairs you recorded. Write down any other language forms or lexical phrases they used more than twice.

Transcribe the best recording. Keep this data for Chapter 7.

Further reading

For further ideas for tasks, see:
J Hadfield 1987 and 1990, Communication Games, Nelson
A Maley and A Duff, 1990, Drama Techniques in Language Learning, CUP
N S Prabhu, 1987, Second Language Pedagogy, OUP
A Wright, D Betteridge and M Buckby, 1984, Games for Language Learning, CUP.
See also G Ramsey, 1987, Images and other books in the Longman Skills series.

Notes

1 S Abdullah, 1993.
2 An excellent account of handling project work in secondary school classes is in R Ribé and N Vidal, 1993.
3 Research indicating the value of planning time and the possible effects of additional constraints can be found in P Skehan and P Foster 1996 in J and D Willis (eds), 1994.
4 J and D Willis, 1989, Level 3 Unit 20 p. 138T, and 1988, Level 1 Unit 5 p. 120T.
6 A very readable introduction to the idea of how we compose in chunks is to be found in A Pawley and F Syder in J C Richards and R Schmidt (eds), 1983.
7 The findings from the analysis of these small samples of spoken language are borne out by far larger studies, such as those reported in R Carter and M McCarthy, 1995. See also M McCarthy and R Carter, 1995.
8 This has also been borne out by research by E Ochs, 1979 and T Givon, 1979, who found that native speakers in different situations (public/private, rehearsed/unrehearsed, familiar topic/unfamiliar topic) use language that is more syntactic/less syntactic. See also M Bygate, P Foster in J and D Willis (eds), 1996.
9 A Koksal, 1993, who was working with Turkish learners in Istanbul.