

# A Task-based approach

In recent years a debate has developed over which approaches to structuring and planning and implementing lessons are more effective. This article presents an overview of a task-based learning approach (TBL) and highlights its advantages over the more traditional Present, Practice, Produce (PPP) approach.

- Present Practice Produce
- The problems with PPP
- A Task-based approach
- The advantages of TBL
- Conclusion

## Present Practice Produce (PPP)

During an initial teacher training course, most teachers become familiar with the PPP paradigm. A PPP lesson would proceed in the following manner.

- First, the teacher **presents** an item of language in a clear context to get across its meaning. This could be done in a variety of ways: through a text, a situation build, a dialogue etc.
- Students are then asked to complete a controlled **practice stage**, where they may have to repeat target items through choral and individual drilling, fill gaps or match halves of sentences. All of this practice demands that the student uses the language correctly and helps them to become more comfortable with it.

- Finally, they move on to the production stage, sometimes called the 'free practice' stage. Students are given a communication task such as a role play and are expected to **produce** the target language and use any other language that has already been learnt and is suitable for completing it.

### The problems with PPP

It all sounds quite logical but teachers who use this method will soon identify problems with it:

- Students can give the impression that they are comfortable with the new language as they are producing it accurately in the class. Often though a few lessons later, students will either not be able to produce the language correctly or even won't produce it at all.
- Students will often produce the language but overuse the target structure so that it sounds completely unnatural.
- Students may not produce the target language during the free practice stage because they find they are able to use existing language resources to complete the task.

### A Task-based approach

Task-based learning offers an alternative for language teachers. In a task-based lesson the teacher doesn't pre-determine what language will be studied, the lesson is based around the completion of a central task and the language studied is determined by what happens as the students complete it. The lesson follows certain stages.

#### Pre-task

The teacher introduces the topic and gives the students clear instructions on what they will have to do at the task stage and might help the students to recall some language that may be useful for the task. The pre-task stage can also often include playing a recording of people doing the task. This

gives the students a clear model of what will be expected of them. The students can take notes and spend time preparing for the task.

### Task

The students complete a task in pairs or groups using the language resources that they have as the teacher monitors and offers encouragement.

### Planning

Students prepare a short oral or written report to tell the class what happened during their task. They then practise what they are going to say in their groups. Meanwhile the teacher is available for the students to ask for advice to clear up any language questions they may have.

### Report

Students then report back to the class orally or read the written report. The teacher chooses the order of when students will present their reports and may give the students some quick feedback on the content. At this stage the teacher may also play a recording of others doing the same task for the students to compare.

### Analysis

The teacher then highlights relevant parts from the text of the recording for the students to analyse. They may ask students to notice interesting features within this text. The teacher can also highlight the language that the students used during the report phase for analysis.

### Practice

Finally, the teacher selects language areas to practise based upon the needs of the students and what emerged from the task and report phases. The students then do practice activities to increase their confidence and make a note of useful language.

### The advantages of TBL

Task-based learning has some clear advantages

- Unlike a PPP approach, the students are free of language control. In all three stages they must use all their language resources rather than just practising one pre-selected item.
- A natural context is developed from the students' experiences with the language that is personalised and relevant to them. With PPP it is necessary to create contexts in which to present the language and sometimes they can be very unnatural.
- The students will have a much more varied exposure to language with TBL. They will be exposed to a whole range of lexical phrases, collocations and patterns as well as language forms.
- The language explored arises from the students' needs. This need dictates what will be covered in the lesson rather than a decision made by the teacher or the coursebook.
- It is a strong communicative approach where students spend a lot of time communicating. PPP lessons seem very teacher-centred by comparison. Just watch how much time the students spend communicating during a task-based lesson.
- It is enjoyable and motivating.

## Conclusion

PPP offers a very simplified approach to language learning. It is based upon the idea that you can present language in neat little blocks, adding from one lesson to the next. However, research shows us that we cannot predict or guarantee what the students will learn and that ultimately a wide exposure to language is the best way of ensuring that students will acquire it effectively. Restricting their experience to single pieces of target language is unnatural.

For more information see '*A Framework for Task-Based Learning*' by Jane Willis, Longman; '*Doing Task-Based Teaching*' by Dave and Jane Willis,

<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/professional-development/teachers/knowing-subject/articles/task-based-approach>

OUP 2007.

Also see [www.willis-elt.co.uk](http://www.willis-elt.co.uk)

Richard Frost, British Council, Turkey