

Do you sometimes feel like you need to teach more language that is relevant to your students' needs? This lesson helps you do this by exploring an approach to learning language through tasks.

Task 1 – Alison's doubts.

Alison is a little unsure about how task-based learning works. Here are 3 questions that she has:

Question 1: What exactly is task-based learning?

Question 2: Can you focus on grammar in a task-based lesson?

Question 3: Is it true that the way students learn is by just picking up language from each other?



Can you answer any of these questions for Alison?

Jot down your answers on a note pad, then check the answer key. 

Task 1 Feedback

Question 1: What exactly is task-based learning?

Answer: *In general, it is an approach to English- language learning in which students learn by doing tasks. However, it is not as straightforward as just doing one task after another.*

Question 2: Can you focus on grammar in a task-based lesson?

Answer: *Yes, you can. The way that you do so is a little different from other approaches, but it is fine to focus on grammar in task-based lessons.*

Question 3: Is it true that the way students learn is by just picking up language from each other?

Answer: *This is one way in which students can learn when working on tasks. However, task-based learning also involves other learning opportunities for students.*

Key skill

Task-based learning provides an alternative approach to focusing on language. It has the key benefit of allowing students some degree of choice in terms of what language they learn while working on tasks. However, it does not mean that grammar and vocabulary are totally ignored.

Task 2 – Who does what?



Numbers 1 to 6 show teacher activity during the stages of a typical task-based lesson. They are in the correct order. Letters a to f describe student activities during these stages. They are not in the correct order. Match the student activity to the teacher activity.

Teacher Activity	Student activity
1. Pre task: The teacher provides information or vocabulary that will help students with the task.	
2. Task: The teacher asks students to perform a task in pairs or small groups with some kind of tangible outcome.	
3. Reporting: The teacher asks each pair or group to prepare and give a report on the outcome of the task.	
4. Model: The teacher provides students with a model of proficient speakers performing the task.	
5. Language noticing: The teacher asks students to study language features in the proficient speaker model.	
6. Practice: The teacher provides students with activities that practise some of the language features in the proficient speaker model.	

Student activity

- a. Students speak or write or both – individually or in pairs.
- b. Students speak in groups and perhaps make notes, then one student speaks alone.
- c. Students read or listen or study new words.
- d. Students study the text.
- e. Students read or listen.
- f. Students speak together and perhaps do some writing or note taking.

Check your ideas in the answer key. 

Key skill

The introduction of the proficient speaker model is an opportunity to focus on language. The general principle is that having done the task themselves, students are usually very interested in seeing how proficient speakers performed the task and what language they used.

Task 3 – What is the rationale for each step?



Numbers 1 to 6 are the correct stages for teacher activity, as in task 2. Letters a to f provide a commentary on each stage. However, they are not in the correct order. Match the commentary to the correct stages.

Stages of teacher activity	Commentary
1. Pre task: The teacher provides information or vocabulary that will help students with the task.	
2. Task: The teacher asks students to perform a task in pairs or small groups with some kind of tangible outcome.	
3. Reporting: The teacher asks each pair or group to prepare and give a report on the outcome of the task.	
4. Model: The teacher provides students with a model of proficient speakers performing the task.	
5. Language noticing: The teacher asks students to study language features in the proficient speaker model.	
6. Practice: The teacher provides students with activities that practise some of the language features in the proficient speaker model.	

Commentary

- This stage should ideally include some kind of problem-solving element that gives students a reason to speak.
- The teacher can provide a task during this stage that either focuses students' attention on a language point, or the teacher can let students choose what they want to focus on.
- This stage is often optional. It depends on what students have done in the previous stage.
- These materials shouldn't be too long or detailed or students will lose time before getting on to the following, key stage.
- This can either be a recording or a tape script or both.
- The teacher should avoid correcting students' language at this stage and focus on the content of what they have to say.



Key skill

Both the first and the last stage are optional. It depends on the nature of the task and the language that appears in the proficient speaker model. Teachers may take in a variety of practice activities for the final stage and let students decide which language point they want more practice in.

Check your ideas in the answer key.

Task 4 – How to prepare a task-based lesson (1)



Letters a to f are some suggested steps in how to plan and prepare a task-based lesson, but they are not in the correct order. Put the steps in the correct order.

Suggested steps for planning a task-based lesson	Order
a. Decide whether you will let students notice the language they want to or whether you will ask them to focus on specific vocabulary or grammar.	
b. Look for reading or listening texts that might be useful at the pre-task stage.	
c. Record a model of the task being done by proficient speakers.	
d. Find a task that has tangible outcomes.	
e. Transcribe the proficient speaker model (or part of it) and look for useful language points.	
f. If you have focused on a specific language point, look for some activities that will provide practice of that language.	

Check your ideas in the answer key.



Task 5 – How to prepare a task-based lesson (2)



Letters a to f are pieces of advice that match the planning steps from the previous task. Match the advice to each step in the planning process. 

Advice	Steps
a. Not only will this provide you with a useful language sample, it will also show you if there are any problems with the task design that need to be fixed before you give it to students.	
b. If there is a particular language point you want to draw students' attention to, your task can focus on any or all aspects of meaning and form associated with that language.	
c. It's best to do this first because this is the cornerstone to the whole approach.	
d. This is usually (but not always) the last step because it can be a useful extra activity rather than an essential one.	
e. These can be a mix of written and spoken tasks. One possibility is to ask students to repeat the original task in different groups.	
f. Your choice here is likely to depend on the language that you find in the proficient speaker model. If there is a language form that occurs consistently in the model, it makes sense to create a language noticing task that focuses on this language point.	

Planning steps

1. Find a task that has tangible outcomes.
2. Record a model of the task with proficient speakers.
3. Transcribe the proficient speaker model (or part of it) and look for useful language points.
4. Decide whether you will let students notice the language they want to or whether you will ask them to focus on specific vocabulary or grammar.
5. If you have focused on a specific language point, look for some activities that will provide practice of that language.
6. Look for reading or listening texts that might be useful at the pre-task stage.

Thinking about your teaching ...

In task-based lessons where students choose the language they wish to focus on, it is interesting to note which language items students want to study. Keep a note of the vocabulary and grammar points they choose and see if it tells you anything about your students' language development. For example, are these language points that students often produce incorrectly?

Note your observations in your *Teaching Log*.

Taking it to the classroom ...

Some learner groups may want you to give feedback on their language use after the reporting phase. Try lessons where you do this and try lessons where you don't. Then ask learners which approach they prefer.

Want to find out more ... ?

Pages 71 – 73 of *The Practice of English Language Teaching* (4th edition) by Jeremy Harmer (Pearson 2007) contain further reading on task-based learning.

Related TaskBook lessons...

You may be interested in the following lessons in the ESOL Teaching Skills TaskBook series, relating to the teaching of grammar:

- **Unit 4 d) Teaching Grammar 1: Different approaches**
(looks at a variety of approaches to teaching grammar)
- **Unit 4 e) Teaching Grammar 2: Grammar from texts**
(outlines a procedure for a text-based approach to grammar lessons)
- **Unit 4 f) Teaching Grammar 3: Grammar through communicative activities**
(looks at how to use communicative activities to focus on grammar)

Answer Key



Task 1 - Feedback

Question 1: What exactly is task-based learning?

Answer: In general, it is an approach to English- language learning in which students learn by doing tasks. However, it is not as straightforward as just doing one task after another.

Question 2: Can you focus on grammar in a task-based lesson?

Answer: Yes, you can. The way that you do so is a little different from other approaches, but it is fine to focus on grammar in task-based lessons.

Question 3: Is it true that the way students learn is by just picking up language from each other?

Answer: This is one way in which students can learn when working on tasks. However, task-based learning also involves other learning opportunities for students.

Task 2 – Feedback

- 1) c
- 2) f
- 3) b
- 4) e
- 5) d
- 6) a

Task 3 – Feedback

- 1) d
- 2) a
- 3) f
- 4) e
- 5) b
- 6) c

Task 4 – Feedback

- 1) d
- 2) c
- 3) e
- 4) a
- 5) f
- 6) b

Task 5 – Feedback

- 1) c
- 2) a
- 3) f
- 4) b
- 5) e
- 6) d