

TASK-BASED INSTRUCTION VERSUS TRADITIONAL METHODOLOGIES

Main argument

I suggest that task-based learning as promoted in the literature is not a useful model for the teaching of EFL in schools, and that most teachers in this context are better served by a an approach that combines tasks with more traditional procedures.

A stronger form of task-based learning may be appropriate in contexts where learners are motivated and academically oriented adults.

Task-based versus traditional language teaching

Task-based: Students learn through engaging in communicative tasks, supplemented by occasional ‘time-out’ for focus on language form.

Traditional: Students learn through being instructed in grammar, vocabulary and the four skills, supplemented by occasional mixed-skills communicative activities.

Both models accept the value of

- a substantial amount of exposure to and engagement with the language;
- activation in fluent, communicative language use;
- explicit focus on form: correction, explanation etc.

Differences

Task-based	Traditional
Focus on form is reactive, incidental.	Focus on form is proactive, central.
Communicative tasks are primary.	Communicative tasks are secondary.
New language is encountered incidentally during tasks.	New language is deliberately taught.
There is little or no focused practice of specific language forms	There is substantial practice of specific language forms.
Lessons are mainly learner-centred.	Lessons are mainly teacher-led.

Why is TBI promoted in the literature?

Research evidence

- Rich interactions in group tasks (Long and Porter, 1985)
- Natural developmental order of acquisition (Pienemann, 1984)
- The success of specific task-based programs in practice (Leaver & Willis, 2004)

But ...

- Minimal language use in task-based interactions (Seedhouse, 1999)

- The value of explicit grammar teaching (Ortega and Norris, 2001)
- The value of explicit vocabulary teaching (Zahar et al., 2001; Laufer, 2003; Schmitt, 2008 ...)
- The value of focused practice based on input (Dekeyser, 2007)
- No research evidence for the relative success of task-based programs in schools (Swan, 2005; Leaver & Willis, 2004)

Failure of traditional methods?

‘...a discredited, meaning-impooverished methodology’ (Skehan, 1997: 94)

Discredited by whom? There is no empirical evidence that traditional methodologies have ‘failed’ (Swan, 2005).

The communicative approach: the rehearsal principle

The assumption that the classroom should provide opportunities to rehearse real-life language use. In contrast: language learning as investment (Widdowson, 1986)

A naturalistic approach

The assumption that since we learn our L1 through communicative interaction, therefore L2 should be learned the same way. But is L1 acquisition in naturalistic settings the ideal model for L2 learning in school courses? There are in fact substantial differences. For example:

- Time available for learning
- Age of the learners
- Knowledge of L1
- Motivation

Current beliefs and attitudes

‘The spirit of the times’ (Waters, 2007):

- Postmodernist rejection of imposed standards and structure
- Concern for what is seen as natural, authentic, real
- The teacher as facilitator, the learner-centred classroom

Thinkers and writers are more likely to be exposed to and influenced by these factors than are teachers.

Interim summary

The reasons for the promotion of TBI in the literature do not seem to have any solid evidence-based foundation (Swan, 2005).

They derive rather from principles that are in accordance with ideological or currently popular approaches to English language-teaching.

Why don’t many teachers adopt task-based instruction?

Uninformed?

Most teachers do not read the research or theoretical literature (Borg, 2009): lack of time, perceived irrelevance or impracticality.

But they read the literature and are often urged to use task-based instruction in teacher training courses: why is it not implemented in practice?

Conservative

Some are, some aren't. But can this accusation be levelled at an entire profession?

Professional

Teachers are professional; if they choose not to use task-based instruction, it is because they see it as less effective in bringing about learning.

Other factors: local culture of learning, learner preferences, upcoming exams, pressure of parents, classroom management issues etc.

The State School English course (in non-English-speaking countries)

- Low level of language (often beginner) → need for teacher input
- Limited time → need for a pre-planned vocabulary and grammatical syllabus
- Limited time → need for focused practice activities
- Lack of learner motivation → need for teacher authority and initiative
- Lower cognitive and metacognitive abilities of learners → need for teacher mediation

But what about situations where these conditions do not apply?

Intermediate or advanced level courses, especially in English speaking countries

- Plenty of time, rich opportunities to encounter and re-encounter new language
- High motivation and willingness to work
- High-level cognitive and metacognitive abilities

Summary and Conclusion

Task-based learning is strongly supported in professional literature, but is not, on the whole, implemented in classrooms, at least in its strong form.

The discrepancy may be due to the fact that writers' sources of knowledge are strongly influenced by current philosophical, educational and methodological trends, whereas teachers are mainly guided by their own professional judgement, based on reflection on practical experience, and are strongly influenced by local constraints.

A basically traditional methodology is probably more appropriate for the teaching of younger, lower-level learners, with the addition of communicative tasks.

Task-based learning in its strong form is probably more appropriate in classes of advanced (adult) learners

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