Teaching task-based lessons

(Adapted from Becoming an Outstanding Languages Teacher

Introduction

These pages focus on managing effective and stimulating task-based lessons for students of all levels. I'll present a rationale for making occasional use of a task-based approach, then follow with a few examples of effective lessons. The main points will be to show how effective teachers recognise the value of using language for a practical purpose, the importance of the communicative principle known as the **information gap** and the need to allow students an opportunity to use the language independently. I'll again emphasise how important it is to provide stimulating, cognitively challenging comprehensible input to allow the natural processes of language acquisition to occur.

Rationale

Teachers are often concerned by the fact that classroom language learning is an artificial process which many students find hard to engage with. The link between learning vocabulary, studying topics, practising verb forms, and the real world of speaking a language seems tenuous. Many students are happy to go along with the process, motivated by pleasing the teacher, getting grades or passing an exam for their future study or career. Some have travelled, already speak a second language or have motivated families who value language learning and engaging with other cultures. But we have to acknowledge that many students take some convincing that learning a language is worthwhile.

With this in mind, some see **content-based** (sometimes called CLIL – Content and Language Integrated Learning) and **task-based** approaches as a partial solution. These place an equally high or even higher value on the content or task as on the language itself. This, so some teachers find, makes the work more motivating. The argument goes that students are not likely to find talking about what's in their pencil case or conjugating the verb *to be* inherently stimulating or even cognitively challenging. They might, however, find the following types of activity of greater interest:

- Online shopping.
- Working on a problem-solving task.
- Doing a project with a partner class.
- Producing a class newspaper or web magazine.
- Creating a menu for a restaurant.
- Making a recipe following a TL menu.
- Learning another subject through the medium of the TL.
- Solving a murder mystery.

Let's look at how we might exploit some of these examples.

Online shopping

This is a very easy task to organise and one which students can enjoy at various levels. I'm going to give an example for **near-beginners**, based on **buying food online**.

Produce a shopping list of items in English for the students to buy from a suitable online store which is easy to navigate and contains clear pictures and prices. Make sure you've checked the site to be sure all items are available. Explain to the class that their job is to browse the site and fill their trolley at the lowest price possible. Students of this age will not have bought groceries online, so there's a real-life skill to be acquired here too. As they work (largely in silence), your job is to monitor that they are all on the right site, answer occasional questions and assist with any navigation problems. If any students finish early you can provide some extra items to search or just let them browse. This task works well with other shopping items, notably clothing and household goods.

Table 1 shows an example grid I've used in French lessons with students in their second year of learning. The supermarket site was *auchan.fr*. You can create an Excel file which will even calculate the total price for the students.

Anglais	Français	Quantité	Prix
Apples (Golden)		1kg	
Pears		500g	
Bananas		500g	
Kiwis		500g	
Pineapple		1	
Tomatoes		500g	
Potatoes		1kg	
Cabbage (green)		1	
Cauliflower		1	
Courgettes		500g	
Onions		500g	
Garlic		1 packet	
Beef (sirloin)		1kg	
Chicken		1	
Lamb (chops)		1	
Jam (Bonne Maman)		2	
Tin of apricots		1	
Ketchup		1	
Green olives (whole)		1 pot	
Olive oil (own brand)		1 litre	
Eggs		6	
Butter (salted)		250g	
Milk (semi-skimmed)		2 litres	
Camembert		1	
Yogurt (with fruit bits)		16	
Pâté		1	
Croissants		10 x 40g	
Cider (cheapest)		1 litre	
Water (Perrier)		1 litre	
Cornflakes		500g	
Potato crisps		6	

A task such as this could be set at the end of a teaching sequence about food and quantities, or even used as an introduction to the topic. It allows students to browse the site, copy down correct spellings on the grid and, in the process, learn how to get best value! It's an excellent way to spend about 45 minutes in a computer room or for using tablets in class.

Producing a class newspaper or webzine

To set up this project with an **intermediate** class, produce a list of features you want to see in your paper or on your site, e.g. news stories, a weather report, an astrology page, advertisements, sports stories, a star interview and crossword. The class is divided into small teams whose job it is to produce material from one of these categories. You could assign relatively harder tasks to some groups. It's important to model at least some of the items, giving them access, say, to a booklet showing similar material. Text books often supply useful models.

If you adopt an old-school approach you could literally cut and paste the material which the students produce into a printed newspaper which can be read by the whole class. It's more likely, however, that you'd do the task digitally, sharing files via a VLE (Virtual Learning Environment) or other sharing platform such as Google

Classroom, Google Drive or Dropbox. The material could be merged to produce an online paper or set of web pages readable by the class or even other students in the school.

The principal challenge with this type of task is to ensure students work efficiently, therefore they require a strict deadline. If you think this sort of work is beyond your students you could scaffold the task by supplying part-finished pieces for them to work on. Typically you'd allocate about three hours to the whole project, some of which could be homework. The linguistic benefits are clear: reading and practice at compositional writing which involves translation and dictionary use.

Making a recipe

For this activity for **intermediate** students you need a simple TL recipe which requires the ingredients students' families are likely to have at home. Ideally the recipe would be a common one associated with the TL culture. For French classes I've used two recipes, one for almond biscuits and one for an onion tart.

Instruct the students to read the recipe, translate it into English (to show evidence they've used the TL recipe, not another one), then make it, possibly with the aid of their parents. If you think any children don't have access to what they need at home, you could enlist the help of the food technology department in your school where the class could make the recipe. Once the recipe is complete you can have a tasting in class. This could become the basis of a further linguistic task (describing food).

One point to make here is that, even if the linguistic or cultural returns on a task are not so great, there's room for the occasional really memorable activity which provides students with a positive association with your subject. There aren't that many lessons students later recall by saying "Do you remember when…?"

Producing a video news bulletin

This project would suit **advanced level** students in groups of about four and involves team-working, reading, TL discussion and presenting. This is the task:

You and your group are on the editorial team whose job is to produce this evening's TV news bulletin. You have a list of news stories which have come in to your office. Discuss their relative merits, choose six and put them in order based on importance. You then need to write a script, choose a news anchor or two and reporters. Scripts need to be written, a teleprompt produced, then the bulletin filmed on video to be shown to the rest of the class. You have two lessons of two hours to complete the task.

List of news stories

1. *The unemployment rate has risen this month to 5.6%. There are now an extra 30 000 jobseekers.*
2. *An earthquake in Turkey reaching 7.0 on the Richter scale has killed an estimated 300 people.*
3. *Following a motorway pile-up in the UK, 5 people have been killed and 15 injured.*
4. *A major road accident in Spain has killed 20 people and injured 35. The weather was foggy at the time.*
5. *Germany beat Spain 2-0 in the semi-final of the European Championships.*
6. *Astronomers say they have detected a new planet at the edge of our solar system.*
7. *A man in Texas claims that his dog can speak English. We have film.*
8. *Scientists are now predicting that global temperatures will rise by at least 3 degrees by the end of this century. The consequences could be devastating.*
9. *The latest James Bond movie opens tomorrow in London with the new Bond played by Idris Elba.*
10. *A petroleum tanker has run aground off the coast of Brittany. Large amounts of oil are already polluting several kilometres of beach in France.*
11. *China announces that it will send two astronauts to the moon next year.*
12. *Singer Beyoncé has announced that she is retiring from recording and touring.*

Running the task

1.   Setting up

Explain the project. Get students into groups (you may wish to engineer this so there is a range of attainment in each group). Emphasise that the task will be conducted almost entirely in TL and it will stop if this rule is broken. Set out the time limit and the fact that any extra work will have to be done independently. Explain that they'll need a studio presenter or two and on-the-spot reporters. They'll need a phone to film with and a teleprompt system (large rolls of paper or, if possible, a digital teleprompt system (these are easy to find online and your technically-minded students will sort this out).

Note that students can get quite excited about this activity and therefore will be tempted to speak in English. You may need to stress the valuable speaking practice students get while doing the task.

2.   Language preparation

Display and hand out some of the useful language the students will need to negotiate this task.

In my opinion	*I don't agree*	*Do you think that…?*	*On the other hand*
We could….	*We should…*	*Tonight's top stories*	*Let's hear from…*
To be interested in	*To be bored by*	*Of great importance*	*Relevant*
I think that	*Presenter*	*Reporter*	*Interview*
On-the-spot	*Why don't we…?*	*Topical*	*News report*

3.   Supervising the task

For a good deal of the time you can just be available for language help and to encourage everyone to take part. Quieter groups may need some extra input to get them underway. Don't worry if you have to speak quite a bit to groups as this is all useful extra TL input. When students are scripting their reports you can do some correcting to help them.

4.   Presenting the task

Some students may want to dress up, film outside reports or use the whiteboard for supporting visuals. They may come up with a theme tune for their bulletin. They can do more than one take and their news bulletins can be uploaded to YouTube if they want. The process is more important than the final product.

If you have concerns that a project of this sort is time-consuming and will only yield a certain amount of language practice, weigh this up once more against the fact that students find such tasks both enjoyable and memorable. Perhaps part of becoming an outstanding teacher is being willing to take a few risks and let the class do their own thing!

Interview a grandparent

This task has the linguistic goal of practising use of the imperfect ("used to") tense. Having presented and thoroughly practised the imperfect tense (see Chapter 7) you can tell students as a homework task to interview a grandparent, elderly relative, or even a parent or carer. Provide them with a series of questions to ask in English: "Where did you live as child? What music did you listen to? What did you watch on TV? What did you eat and drink? What did your parents do for a living? How was life different?" etc. They then have to write up their answers in the form of a short essay. They could also record their work digitally. With fast groups you don't need to provide any more resources, but with lower-attaining students you could provide gapped answers for

them to fill in. They would have to do some dictionary work to find the TL words needed to fill the gaps. This task gets students talking with their family and I'm sure they learn a good deal in the process. You can imagine that this would be an unusually motivating homework assignment for many students.

Information gaps

At a simpler level, the information gap principle allows you to set up easy task-based activities which require students to exchange information for a purpose. For these to work you will have to provide a **need to communicate** and give each partner **information which the other doesn't possess**. These can be the simplest of guessing games which require minimal preparation. Information gap activities are useful for various reasons. They provide an opportunity for extended speaking practice, they represent real communication, motivation can be high, and they require skills such as clarifying meaning and re-phrasing. Typical information gaps include: describe and draw, spot the difference, jigsaw reading, jigsaw listening and split dictations (where each partner has a different partial transcript).

Here are five minimal preparation guessing games which exploit the information gap principle:

1. **Last weekend**
   For **low-intermediates**. Get each partner to write down five real or invented activities they did over the previous weekend. Each partner has to guess what the other person did by asking yes/no questions. Encourage students to come up with original or wacky ideas. This is good for practising the past (preterite) tense.

2. **Shopping list**
   For **near-beginners**. Each person writes down a list of ten items they're going to buy at the supermarket. Each partner has to guess the other's list.

3. **Mute customer**
   Any level. Again, based on a shopping list or just a set of words. Each partner has a list and must explain what's on their list by using gesture, not words. This is fun for reviewing vocabulary at various levels.

4. **Holiday plans**
   Intermediate. Each partner lists ten things they're going to do during the next holiday. Partners use yes/no questions to work out the other person's list. This is effective for future or immediate future tense usage.

5. **Proverbs**
   Advanced. Display on the board in two columns a list of, say, 16 proverbs or sayings in the TL. Alternatively provide a handout with the proverbs written in two columns. Make sure students understand them, preferably by explaining in the TL. You could translate if you want to get on to the pair work quickly, but the advantage of using the TL is that students already hear a model of how to explain the sayings. Then, each partner chooses five proverbs or sayings which they attempt to exemplify or explain while the other student tries to guess what they are. Partners could prompt each other for further information. This is good for creative use of language at a higher level.

Activities such as the above can be easily tacked on to a more traditional task to spice up a lesson, give you a much-needed rest and add variety. Skilled teachers know when to stop leading from the front and when to change the perspective of a lesson, allowing students to listen a bit less and talk more.

Here are three more examples:

1. **Hotel problems (intermediate)**
   Each partner has a role card. A solution to the problem must be found.

   Student A: *You are a guest staying at a hotel. The hotel website says it is a four-star luxury hotel, but in your room the sheets and towels are dirty, the bathroom is too small, the street outside is very noisy*

and ... (make up two more problems). You want to change to a better room and you want a reduction on your bill. Talk to the receptionist and solve the problem.

Student B: *You are a hotel receptionist. There is a guest staying at the hotel who complains about everything, even when there isn't a problem. You are allowed to move a guest to a different room, but you cannot change the price of a room. Talk to the guest and try to resolve the issue.*

2.   **Where is the ghost? (Near-beginners)**
In this example each partner has a side on view of a two storey house, depicting furniture and ghost in various places. The ghosts are in different places in each partner's picture. By asking yes/no questions each partner has to find out where their partner's ghosts are. This task would fit very well at the end of a sequence about house and home.

3.   **Finding personal information (low intermediate)**

Student card A

Name	Home town	Family	Job	Pastimes	Movies
Sophie		42, married, 2 children	doctor		romcoms
			teacher	reading (science fiction)	
Lionel	Barcelona			video games	action
			social worker	baking	
Jean-Paul	Toulouse				dramas

Student card B

Name	Home town	Family	Job	Pastimes	Movies
	Manchester			running	
Mario	Milan	27, single			horror
		32, married with one child	journalist		
Georgia	Berlin	living with Harry			foreign
		40, married to David	IT	playing saxophone	

The aim of the task is for each student to complete their card (see **Figure 2**) by asking their partner appropriate TL questions. This activity fits well later in a sequence of work about using questions. It's assumed that you've explained and practised this rigorously beforehand and that students have gained a little automaticity and know how to use the words *what, where (from), how old, what kind, who with* along with the appropriate question syntax for the language concerned. Before starting the task, rehearse with the class on the board how to ask the questions they need. With some classes you may need to leave these questions displayed, or at least a gapped version of them. Alternatively, you could leave them visible, then gradually erase parts during the activity, depending on how well students are getting on. These are the questions they need:

- *What is the first person's name? How do you spell it?*
- *Where's he/she from?*
- *How old is he/she? What is their family situation?*
- *What does he/she do for a living?*
- *What does he/she like doing in their spare time?*
- *What kind of movies does he/she like?*

You may prefer to explain the task in English. If this gets students underway quickly and confidently it's worth the time saved. Clarity of instructions is so important when setting up a task. With higher-attaining groups you could get students to volunteer more information than is given on the cards, giving them some scope for creativity and humour.

Once the pairs are working you can take a back seat, checking that the task is proceeding in the TL. You need to be available for questions or to help along any pairs having difficulty. To bring the activity to a close you can ask individuals to summarise what they know about each person, thus putting at least six sentences together in a row.

The value of this activity lies in the repetition required, the opportunity to listen and speak under little pressure from the teacher and the fact that there is a clear task to be completed. One issue which arises when running tasks like this is that some pairs will finish more quickly than others. In this case, have a second pair of cards available.

Tech tips

As usual, look for tasks rich in TL input. Avoid tasks where too much time is spent on creation and too little on non-language learning activity.

Use review websites such as **booking.com or TripAdvisor**. Students can plan a holiday for a family. They would need to include at least five different destinations, summarising each one in writing either in English or the TL. The same can be done for sites which feature **holiday homes** and **campsites**.

Plan a visit to a theme park. Using a TL website, plan a day's visit incorporating which rides you'll do, where you'll eat, how you'll get there, when you'll arrive and leave. This would naturally be a good fit for using the future tense.

Support a charity. Advanced students can be given four different TL charity websites to study, together with a set of questions to research, e.g. What does the charity support? How does it raise funds? What is its history? etc. The task is, with reading and note-taking, to choose a charity to support and justify the decision.

Share work online. Some teachers find **Google Classroom**, **Google Drive** or **Dropbox** an effective and convenient way for students to share their work for reading and assessment by the teacher. Others use a school-based **VLE** (Virtual Learning Environment), e.g. **Moodle,** for the same purpose.

Teleprompter apps and websites are numerous. There are free ones, including for tablets, or more sophisticated premium versions.

Concluding remarks

Project and task-based approaches have advantages but they also have their limitations. Why? Although they may be motivating for students because of their content or inherent interest as a task, it's hard to make them fit within a structured curriculum based on progressing from easy to harder language. Texts you want to use for some projects can be too difficult and students may lack the skills to communicate as well as they'd like. It generally makes most sense to make occasional use of tasks or bigger projects to supplement your normal scheme of work or curriculum plan. If you can make them fit within your topic curriculum, even better. You might also like the idea of doing them with classes as an end of term special activity when you're running out of steam and want students to be working independently.

When you do a task or content-based project of any sort, you need to decide to what extent you focus purely on the content or the language to be used. If you end up doing lots of language exercises, you may remove some of the interest from the topic itself. So there's a balance to be struck. This approach may also suit teachers who prefer to encourage a greater degree of group work and learner autonomy. If your school's culture leans towards this end of the spectrum, content and task-based approaches may be a decent fit. Overall, however, although they may offer advantages in terms of motivation and add variety, if used on their own they are unlikely to lead to higher attainment in the long run.