

## Learning by doing in the ESP context

### *Introduction*

If learners are to develop the competence they need to use a second language easily and effectively outside the classroom they need to experience how language is used as a tool for communicating inside it. Tasks enable us to organize teaching along these lines. They aim at creating a real purpose for language use and provide a natural context for language study. This methodological framework offers students a rich but comprehensible exposure to language in use, through listening and reading, and provides opportunities for both spontaneous and planned speaking and writing. It also motivates learners to improve and build on whatever language they already have. This paper addresses a form of teaching that treats language primarily as a tool for communicating rather than as an object for study or manipulation. It provides the rationale for task-based learning, looks at different task types, explores practical considerations regarding the design of task-based courses and their implementation in the ESP classroom.

### *Rationale for TBL*

Proposals for task-based syllabuses have arisen as an alternative to linguistic syllabuses out of the recognition that it was not possible to specify what a learner would learn in linguistic terms. Prabhu (1987) argued that it was necessary to abandon the pre-selection of linguistic items in any form and instead specify the content of teaching in terms of holistic units of communication, i.e. *tasks*. This was supposed to allow teaching *through* communication rather than *for* communication<sup>1</sup>. The essential assumption of TBL is that through tasks we can engage learners in the same kinds of cognitive processes, like for example top-down and bottom-up processing, noticing, negotiating meaning, lexicalized or rule-based production

---

<sup>1</sup> TBL is premised on the theoretical view that the instruction needs to be compatible with the cognitive processes involved in L2 acquisition. Linguistic syllabuses were seen as inadequate, thus ineffective in promoting acquisition because they interrupt the cognitive processes involved in L2 acquisition. They also result in stiff and unnatural samples of target language. SLA has shown that while learning L2 students construct a series of systems, known as *interlanguages*, which are gradually grammaticized and restructured as learners incorporate new features. Research on developmental sequences has shown that learners pass through a series of transitional stages in acquiring a specific grammatical feature such as negatives – L2 acquisition is a *process* that is incompatible with teaching seen as the presentation and practice of a series of *products*. Hence, a widely used methodological procedure consisting of present-practice-produce (PPP) traditionally employed in the weak version of CLT which assumes that it is possible to lead learners from controlled to automatic use of new language features by means of text-manipulation exercises that structure language for the learner followed by text-creation tasks where learners structure language for themselves (Batstone 1994) does not necessarily optimize conditions for L2 acquisition.

that arise in communication outside the classroom and which will promote acquisition.

Willis (1996) claims that three essential conditions seem to stimulate learning in the classroom: *exposure*, *use*, and *motivation*. This is supplemented by the fourth condition – *instruction*, which is desirable, though not essential. Students take advantage of their exposure to the target language in use which involves listening and/or reading<sup>2</sup>. They try to make sense of whatever they hear and/or read, and observe how others express the meanings that they want to be able to express. When learners get involved in a conversation they often use strategies to adjust the input to suit their level of comprehension. Knowing the topic and the purpose of the conversation, the student can make sensible predictions about meaning and check anything they are not sure of having understood correctly. Thus, this modified exposure becomes comprehensible input and helps acquisition<sup>3</sup>.

As important is *learner engagement* and output<sup>4</sup>. If learners know that they will be expected to make real use of the target language themselves they pay more attention to what they hear and/or read, and process the input more analytically, noticing useful features of language. Using language for real purposes gives students chances to express what they feel or think and recall and use the language they already know. Through interaction learners have the chance to acquire a wide range of discourse skills, such as opening and closing a conversation, interacting and turn-taking, reaching agreement and shifting the topic - necessary for them to be able to manage their own conversations or to control the level and kind of input they receive. Learners also need the experience of communicating in a variety of situations, for example in different size groups and for different audiences, since linguistic strategies vary considerably according to circumstances.

The third essential condition for a successful learning is motivation to learn – motivation for students to process the exposure they receive, and motivation to use the target language as often as possible in order to benefit from exposure to it and its use. Thus, tasks must provide

---

<sup>2</sup> Krashen's *Input Hypothesis* claims that language acquisition is input-driven, i.e. learners acquire L2 incidentally and subconsciously when they are able to comprehend the input they are exposed to (Krashen 1981). He suggests that input becomes comprehensible when it is contextually embedded and is roughly tuned to the learners' level of proficiency.

<sup>3</sup> It is essential that learners are exposed to the variety of language they will need to understand and use outside the classroom – language they will need to study other subjects, to use at work, or for pleasure. As important is the quality of exposure – a variety of types of language use. Exposure to a restricted, simplified or specially written texts, sentence-level examples and scripted dialogues is not enough.

<sup>4</sup> Long's *Interaction Hypothesis* places a similar emphasis on the role of input as Krashen, but Long claims that the *best* input for language acquisition is that which arises when learners have the opportunity to negotiate meaning in exchanges where an initial communication problem has occurred. As important is the input through the negative feedback that learners receive by means of recasts, i.e. interlocutor reformulations of learner utterances that contain errors, and through the opportunities to reformulate their own erroneous utterances in a more target-like way (Long 1996).

students with a *reasonable challenge* and must be cognitively involving and motivating<sup>5</sup>.

Instruction which focuses on language form is generally accepted to be able both to speed up the rate of language development and raise the ultimate level of the learners' attainment<sup>6</sup>. It certainly helps students notice specific features of the target language and gives them the opportunity to process grammatical and lexical patterns and to form hypotheses about their use and meaning. Consequently, learners are then more likely to recognize these features occurring in the input they are exposed to. Sometimes they notice a new piece of evidence which disconfirms a hypothesis and changes the whole picture they have of a particular form. This leads to a restructuring of their current system to accommodate the new evidence and drives their language development forward.

### *Criteria features of a task*

A task is a *workplan* that is intended to engage the learner in meaning-focused language use; it constitutes a plan for learners' activity (Breen 1989)<sup>7</sup>. The instructions are essential since they specify its purpose, i.e. its outcome, and what the participants need to do to reach it. The workplan may require learners to engage in a language activity such as that found in the real world, e.g. completing a form, or that is artificial, e.g. determining whether two pictures are the same or different. However, even in case of artificial tasks the processes of language use that result from performing a task, e.g. asking and answering questions or dealing with misunderstandings, will always reflect those that occur in real-world communication. Tasks which are not authentic at least have aspects of interactional authenticity.

The overall goal of a task is to elicit language use. It seeks to develop L2 proficiency through communicating. In contrast to *exercises* which are activities that call for primarily form focused language use, *tasks* call for meaning-focused language use<sup>8</sup>. Thus, some kind of gap, i.e. an information, opinion or reasoning gap is incorporated in them. The gap motivates learners to use language in order to close it. Another key difference results from the role of the participants. The participants of a *task* function mainly as language users - they must

---

<sup>5</sup> Motivation is enhanced by success and satisfaction – if students feel they have achieved something worthwhile, through their own individual effort, they are more likely to participate the next time. Hence, it is necessary for teachers to set achievable goals and to highlight students' successes.

<sup>6</sup> Instruction does not change the learners' developmental sequence, which means that students will not necessarily learn what we teach them. However, given adequate exposure and the right conditions their language systems will develop along similar lines to those who acquire the language naturally. Long (1985) emphasizes the need for learners to attend to form consciously while they are communicating. Tasks, then, have to be designed in such ways that will ensure a primary focus on meaning but will also allow for incidental attention to form.

<sup>7</sup> A number of definitions of task, drawn from both the research and pedagogical literatures can be found in Ellis 2003.

<sup>8</sup> We need to recognize that the overall purpose of tasks is the same as exercises, i.e. learning a language, yet the difference lies in the means by which this purpose is to be achieved.

employ the same communicative processes as those involved in real-world activities. Thus, any learning that takes place is incidental. Contrary to this, an *exercise* requires the participants to function primarily as learners, hence learning is intentional<sup>9</sup>. A task can involve any of the four language skills<sup>10</sup>. In this respect, tasks are no different from exercises. A task engages *cognitive processes* – “processing and understanding *language*” is essential (Richards, Platt, and Weber 1985), while carrying out a task students get involved “in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language” (Nunan 1989). The workplan requires learners to employ cognitive processes such as selecting, classifying, ordering, reasoning, transforming information from one form of representation to another and evaluating information in order to carry out the task. These processes influence but do not determine the choice of language – they restrict the range of linguistic forms a user will need to complete the task but leave the actual choice of forms to the learner<sup>11</sup>.

All tasks result in some *clear outcome* or *specified objective*, other than simply the use of language, which can be judged in terms of content. Ellis (2003) distinguishes between *outcome* – what the learners arrive at when they have completed the task, for example, a list of differences, and *aim* – the pedagogic purpose of the task, which is to elicit meaning-focused language use, receptive and/or productive. This distinction is important since it is possible to achieve a successful outcome without achieving the aim of the task<sup>12</sup>. A definition of a task provided by Bygate, Skehan, and Swain (2001) incorporates all that has been said so far about the nature of tasks:

*“A task is an activity which requires learners to use language, with the emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective, and which is chosen so that it is most likely to provide information for learners and teachers which will help them in their own learning” (cited in Ellis 2003, p.9).*

Certain design features typical of tasks have been outlined in *Table 1*:

---

<sup>9</sup> When learners engage in tasks they do not always focus on meaning and act as language users. While a task requires a learner to act primarily as a language user and give focal attention to message conveyance, it allows for peripheral attention to be paid to deciding what forms to use.

<sup>10</sup> The literature on tasks ( Bygate, Skehan, and Swain 2001) assumes that tasks are directed at oral skills, particularly speaking. Materials for the task may also involve some reading and, if a planning stage is involved, learners may also be required to write, but the assumption is that the task itself is performed orally.

<sup>11</sup> The workplan does not specify what language the task participants should use but rather allows them to choose the language needed to achieve the outcome of the task. Tasks indicate the content but the actual language to be negotiated in the classroom is left to the teacher and the learner.

<sup>12</sup> Learners performing a spot-the-difference task based on pictures may successfully identify the differences by showing each other their pictures, but since they have done it non-verbally the aim of the task will not have been met. However, the real purpose of the task is not that learners should arrive at a successful outcome but that they should use language in ways that will promote language learning. In fact, the actual outcome of a task may be of no real pedagogic importance. For example, whether learners successfully identify the difference between two pictures is not what is crucial for language learning. It is the cognitive and linguistic processes involved in reaching the outcome that matter. That is why it would be risky to assess task performance merely in terms of task outcome – the assessment of task performance must lie in whether learners manifest the kind of language use believed to promote language learning.

Design feature	Description
1. Goal	The general purpose of the task specified in terms of what aspect(s) of communicative competence <sup>13</sup> the task is intended to contribute to, e.g. to practice the ability to describe objects concisely; to provide an opportunity for the use of relative clauses
2. Input	The verbal or non verbal information supplied by the task, e.g. a map, pictures, written text or a radio broadcast
3. Conditions	The way in which the information is presented, e.g. <i>split</i> vs. <i>shared</i> information, or the way in which it is to be used, e.g. <i>converging</i> (reciprocal) - requiring collaboration vs. <i>diverging</i> (non-reciprocal) - requiring independence
4. Procedures	The methodological procedures to be followed in performing the task, e.g. individual/ group/ pair work, planning time vs. no planning time
5. Predicted outcomes:	
Product	The <i>product</i> that results from completing the task, e.g. a completed table, a route drawn in on a map, a list of differences between two pictures. The predicted product can be <i>open</i> , i.e. allow for several possibilities, or <i>closed</i> , i.e. allow for only one correct solution
Process	The linguistic and cognitive processes the task is hypothesized to generate.

Table 1: A framework for describing tasks (adopted from Ellis 2003: 21)

### Tasks in Language Learning/Teaching

Task-based instruction is not a new approach. It puts tasks at the center of one's methodological focus and views the learning process as a set of communicative tasks that are directly linked to the curricular goals they serve, the purposes of which extend beyond the practice of language for its own sake. Tasks, therefore, are an important feature of *communicative language teaching* (CLT). Whereas some methodologists have simply incorporated tasks into traditional language-based approaches to teaching, others have treated them as units of teaching in their own right and have designed whole courses around them. These two ways of using tasks can be referred to respectively as *task-supported* and *task-based language teaching*<sup>14</sup>. The considerations below refer to the latter.

One of the attractions of a task-based approach which is compatible with a process view of

<sup>13</sup> Canale (1983) distinguishes four aspects of competence: linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic. In the ESP context it should be supplemented by *conceptual* and *process* or *technological* competence. The former accounts for the specific content/subject matter of the particular ESP type. The latter is used to denote the skills necessary to facilitate communication in the specific discipline by means of media and new technologies. These skills involve general computer skills (e.g. word processing, Internet and multi-media training), library research skills, the ability to take notes and use office equipment.

<sup>14</sup> This distinction parallels the distinction between a *weak* and a *strong* version of CLT. The weak version views tasks as a way of providing communicative practice for language items that have been introduced in a more traditional way. They constitute a necessary but not a sufficient basis for a language curriculum. The strong version sees tasks as a means of enabling learners to learn a language by experiencing how it is used in communication. In the strong version tasks are both necessary and sufficient for learning (Ellis 2003).

language acquisition<sup>15</sup> is that it appears to blur the traditional distinction between syllabus, i.e. a statement of what is to be taught, and methodology, i.e. a statement of how to teach. Nunan (1989) argues that in this kind of teaching the focus shifts from *the outcomes of instructions*, i.e. the linguistic knowledge or skills to be mastered, towards *the processes of learning*, i.e. what learners need to do in order to learn. The *what* and *how* of teaching are merged. TBL is also in line with humanistic language teaching, which emphasizes the achievement of students' full potential for growth by acknowledging the importance of the affective dimension in learning as well as the cognitive. Humanistic approaches encourage learners to recognize their feelings and put them to use by caring for and sharing with others thereby increasing their own self-esteem and motivation to learn (Moskowitz 1977).

Another advantage of tasks is that they can be designed with a metacognitive focus for learner-training purposes – they can help learners become aware of, reflect on, and evaluate their own learning styles and the strategies they use to learn. For example, Ellis and Sinclair (1989) offer a number of tasks aimed at making learners more effective and self-directed in their approach to learning L2.

### *Classifying tasks*

A survey of the research literature on tasks reveals a bewildering array of task types, variously labeled. Willis' (1996) pedagogic classification based on an analysis of a wide range of tasks commonly found in textbook materials reflects the variety of operations learners are required to carry out while performing tasks. These are:

1. *Listing* – brainstorming and fact-finding, the completed outcome of a task is a list,
2. *Ordering and sorting* – sequencing, ranking, categorizing or classifying items,
3. *Comparing* – finding differences or similarities in information,
4. *Problem-solving* – tasks that demand intellectual activity as in puzzles or logic problems,
5. *Sharing personal experiences* – tasks that allow learners to talk freely about themselves and share experiences,
6. *Creative tasks* – projects, often involving several stages that can incorporate the various task types mentioned above and can include the need to carry out some research.

Although this classification is not exhaustive it will definitely help generate a variety of actual

---

<sup>15</sup> The *process syllabus* advocated by Breen and Candlin is constructed through negotiation between the teacher and the students. Learners carry out their own needs analysis, find and choose content appropriate to their needs and interests, plan procedures for working in the classroom, and reflect on and evaluate every aspect of the teaching-learning process. There is no a priori syllabus. The teacher can, however, call on a set of curriculum guidelines which specify the range of options available to the participants (Candlin and Murphy 1987). In contrast, Prabhu's *procedural syllabus* provides a specification of the tasks to be used in the classroom (Prabhu 1987).

tasks.

Tasks can be *closed* and *open*. The former are highly structured, have very specific goals and very precise instructions. The latter are more loosely structured and have less specific goal. The more specific the goal, 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. Tasks can also be classified as *unfocused* and *focused*. *Unfocused tasks* predispose learners to choose from a range of forms but they are not designed with the use of a specific form in mind. In contrast, *focused tasks* aim to induce learners to process, receptively or productively, some particular linguistic feature, for example, a grammatical structure. Of course, this processing must occur as a result of performing activities that satisfy the key criteria of a task, i.e. that language is used pragmatically to achieve some non-linguistic outcome<sup>16</sup>.

Prabhu (1987) in his Bangalore/Madras *Communicational Teaching Project* (CTP) classifies tasks used in the project according to cognitive operations they involve. He distinguishes:

- a) *information gap activity* - transfer of the given information from one person/form/place to another,
- b) *reasoning gap activity* - deriving new information through processes of inference, deduction, practical reasoning or a perception of relationships or patterns,
- c) *opinion gap activity* - identifying and articulating a personal preference, feeling, or attitude in response to a given situation<sup>17</sup>.

Another typology of tasks, a rhetorical classification, draws on theories of rhetoric that distinguish different discourse domains in terms of their structure and linguistic properties, namely narrative, instructions, description, reports, etc. It often underlies language courses for academic purposes and is often linked to the specific language functions that figure in academic written discourse, for example, definitions, classifications, giving examples. One advantage of adopting such classification is that it lends itself to the design of specific purpose courses, as learners' needs can often be readily specified in terms of the specific domains they need to master.

### *Designing task-based ESP courses*

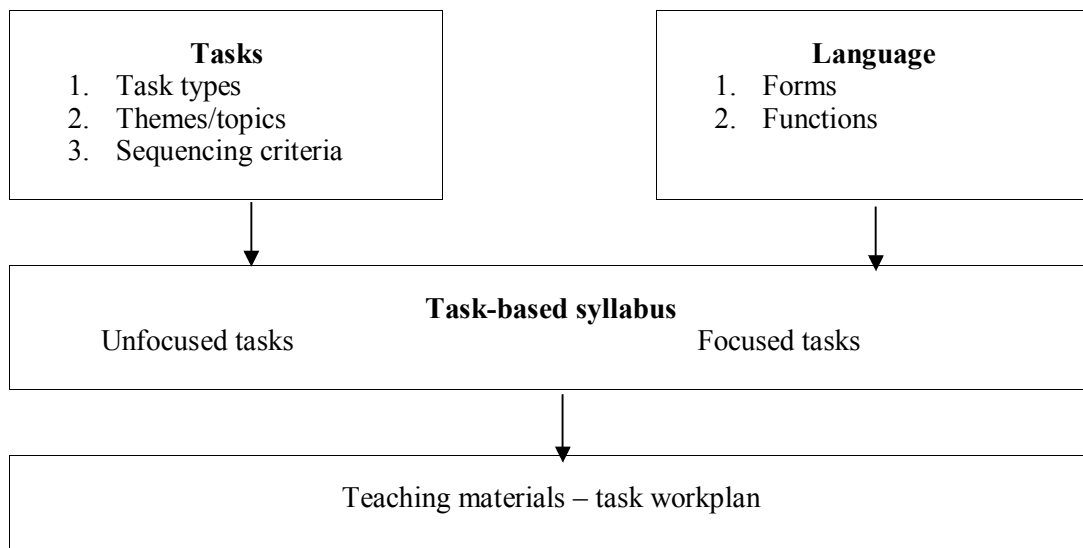
Tasks seem to be tailor-made for ESP courses. As Long (1985) has stated *task* is the ideal unit

---

<sup>16</sup> It is not easy to design *grammar tasks* – learners can always fall back on their strategic competence to avoid the use of a targeted structure. Of course the teacher can make it clear that learners must use the targeted structure when they perform the task, but this would encourage learners to focus primarily on form with the result that the task then ceases to be a task and becomes instead an exercise.

<sup>17</sup> Prabhu claims that using language for reasoning fosters acquisition. The premise is intuitively appealing, but untested. There is no empirical research to show that reasoning-gap activities work better for acquisition than information-gap or opinion-gap activities. Yet, we can conclude that the type of task that works best may depend on the contingencies of individual teaching contexts (Ellis 2003).

for specifying the content of specific purpose courses because it most closely reflects what learners need to do with the language<sup>18</sup>. Construction of a task-based syllabus requires a specification of the tasks to be included in the syllabus<sup>19</sup>. For this reason it is helpful to classify tasks in terms of their type, to determine their thematic content and then to sequence them using appropriate criteria for grading their level of difficulty for the learner. If a syllabus is to incorporate focused tasks, the framework has to include a specification of the features of language, i.e. the forms and functions of language. In such a case consideration needs to be given to the sequencing of both the tasks and the linguistic content. *Figure 1* identifies the key elements in the construction of a task-based course:



*Figure 1:* Designing a task-based course (Ellis 2003: 206)

In the case of a specific-purpose course design, topic selection may be motivated primarily by an analysis of the target tasks the learners will need to perform. Long (1985) notes that there are ready-made job descriptions in task format, for example *The Dictionary of Occupational Titles*, U.S. Department of Labor, 1977. These provide accounts of not only what people in particular occupations do but also the kinds of topics they deal with. They constitute what Long calls *the target tasks*, i.e. the real-world activities learners engage in. For example, a shipping and receiving clerk has to keep records on incoming and outgoing shipments and to verify bills of lading. Other useful tools which can be employed for the identification of how and in what mode English is or could be used at the level of an individual post in a given company are: *the Language Activities* and *Task Checklist* (Reeves and Wright 1996). *The*

<sup>18</sup> By means of *needs analysis* it is possible to establish the target tasks that a specific group of learners need to be able to perform.

<sup>19</sup> Construction of tasks has led to perceiving materials not as merely texts to which students are exposed, but as activities the learners must engage themselves in. Interesting projects such as Herbolich's box kites (1985), Bloor and St John's writing project (1988), and Barron's engineering project (1991) clearly illustrate the value of task-based learning in ESP.



*Checklist*, developed from a large-scale survey of foreign language use in UK enterprises carried out by the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry, is organized into nine broad functional categories such as market research, sales and marketing, purchasing, logistics, financial and secretarial, fundamental to any company<sup>20</sup>. The element in the function that involves foreign language communication is termed *an activity*. Once the language activities and tasks involved in the post and function have been identified, the most typical topics are found. These topics will indicate the vocabulary or lexical field that is used, e.g. quantities, dates, automotive components, computer terms, and so on. *Appendix 1* shows a sample of the foreign language needs analysis grid which helps elicit the use of a foreign language, and particularly, the specific tasks carried out by each employee. Along the vertical lines of the grid the communicative tasks entailed by their function (together they compose language activities) which an employee has to perform are recorded. In the left-hand column the types of topic area are recorded. These topics will indicate the vocabulary or lexical field that is used. Finally, the task and the vocabulary are matched in the grid, with one tick indicating occasional use, two – moderate use, and three – frequent.

A syllabus also requires that the content be sequenced so as to facilitate maximum learning. For this reason it is necessary to determine the complexity of individual tasks so that tasks can be matched to learners' level of development. Task complexity can be analyzed in terms of input, conditions, processes and outcomes. *Table 2* summarizes the grading criteria:

---

<sup>20</sup> For *Market research function* whose *activity* is to measure and analyze the characteristics of foreign language markets, the following tasks have been identified: accessing foreign language sources of data, designing foreign language questionnaires, telephone interviews with foreign language speakers, face-to face interviews with foreign language speakers, making notes from foreign language interviews, reading foreign language advertisements and trade journals, writing reports and making travel arrangements (Reeves and Wright 1996:105).

Criterion	Easy	Difficult
<b>A. Input</b>		
1. Medium	pictorial    written	oral
2. Code complexity	high frequency vocabulary; short and simple sentences	low frequency vocabulary; complex sentence structure
3. Cognitive complexity		
a. information type	static    dynamic	abstract
b. amount of information	few elements/relationships	many elements/relationships
c. degree of structure	well-defined structure	little structure
d. context dependency	visual support	no visual support
4. Familiarity of information	familiar	unfamiliar
<b>B. Conditions</b>		
1. Interactant relationship (negotiating of meaning)	two-way	one-way
2. Task demands	single task	dual task
3. Discourse mode required to perform a task	dialogic	monologic
<b>C. Processes</b>		
1. Cognitive operations:		
a. type	exchanging information reasoning	exchanging opinions
b. reasoning need	few steps involved	many steps involved
<b>D. Outcomes</b>		
1. Medium	pictorial	written    oral
2. Scope	closed?	open?
3. Discourse mode of task outcome	lists, descriptions (the easiest) narratives, classifications (intermediate)	arguments, instructions

*Table 2: Criteria for grading tasks (Ellis 2003: 228)*

Thus, the planning of a tasked-based syllabus will involve the following procedures:

1. determination of the goal(s) of the course in terms of its pedagogic focus (general/ specific purpose), skill focus (listening, speaking, reading, writing, learner training) and language focus (unfocused/ focused);
2. task type choice, specification of particular themes the tasks will deal with; general activities the learners will be required to undertake will be specified;
3. specification of the nature of the tasks to be used in detail – selecting options relating to input, conditions, processes, and outcomes;
4. task sequencing (depending on task complexity)<sup>21</sup>.

*Table 3* illustrates part of a tasked-based syllabus for business purposes:

<sup>21</sup> Opponents claim that inability to sequence tasks in accordance with explicitly defined criteria constitutes a damaging limitation of task-based syllabus. Ellis, however, argues that although problematic, it does not seriously threaten the case for task-based teaching (Ellis 2003).

Topic	General activity	Task option
Negotiating a distributorship agreement	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Listing</i>: brainstorming criteria for choosing a supplier/ new market</li> <li>2. <i>Ordering and sorting</i>: weighting criteria of choice for a supplier/ distributor</li> <li>3. <i>Comparing</i>: choosing the best offer</li> <li>4. <i>Problem-solving</i>: reaching agreement on a distributorship contract</li> </ol>	<p><i>Input</i>:</p> <p>pictorial/ written tight structure abstract<sup>22</sup> context-supported reference</p> <p><i>Conditions</i>:</p> <p>shared information; dual task one/ two way; interaction required divergent/ convergent dialogic</p> <p><i>Processes</i>:</p> <p>exchanging information/ opinions, reasoning</p> <p><i>Outcomes</i>:</p> <p>oral/ written open arguments</p>

Table 3: An example of part of a task-based syllabus for business purposes (based on Casler, K., Palmer, D. 1989. *Business Assignments*. Oxford: OUP.).

### *The methodology of TBL*

When we want to design a task-based lesson we have to take into consideration three principal phases<sup>23</sup>:

1. *pre-task* - prepares students to perform the task in ways that will promote acquisition, concerns the various activities that teachers and students can undertake before they start the task (involves establishing the outcome of the task, planning time, providing a model or doing a similar task),
2. *during task* – centers around the task itself and affords various instructional options, such as time pressure<sup>24</sup>,
3. *post-task* – involves procedures for following up on the task performance.

TBL calls for the participants to forget where they are and why they are there and to act in the belief that they can learn the language indirectly through communicating in it rather than directly through studying it. Since it is easier to achieve when students are interacting among themselves, pair and group work are seen central. Collaborative work on tasks enables learners to perform beyond the capacities of any individual learner. Pair/group work increases

<sup>22</sup> *Abstract tasks* are ones that present information that has to be used to form an opinion or justify a position.

<sup>23</sup> In fact, only the *during the task* phase is obligatory in TBL. Minimally a task-based lesson consists of the students just performing the task. Yet, *pre-task* or *post-task* phases can serve a crucial role by optimizing the effectiveness of the language development in the classroom.

<sup>24</sup> Yuan and Ellis (2003) found that giving students an unlimited time to perform a narrative task resulted in language that was both more complex and more accurate in comparison to a control group that was asked to perform the same task under time pressure. If teachers want to emphasize fluency, however, they need to set a time limit.

the quantity of learner speech, allows for instruction individualization, reduces anxiety, increases motivation, enjoyment, independence, social integration. It can also increase learning ( Jackobs 1998)<sup>25</sup>.

However, the very nature of a task, i.e. the fact that it is directed at accomplishing a specified outcome, may result in limited interactions, thus a restricted variety of communication. That is why teachers have to monitor their students' performance of a task carefully to see whether the interactions manifest the minimalized and pidgin-like uses of language. If it is necessary focus on form should be provided<sup>26</sup>.

### *Case studies*

Case studies illustrate well how a task-based approach can be used successfully in the ESP classroom. The case study method is based on the approach used in MBA programs at Harvard Business School and at many other major schools of business. It has been adapted to teach ESP both in Europe and in intensive programs in the United States. Case studies bring the reality of the business world into the classroom through the active involvement of the student in meaningful, practice-oriented learning activities. With its emphasis on teaching business concepts, situational analysis and problem-solving skills the case study approach bridges the gap between English language and business content instruction.

A case study is defined as a description of a problem or decision that faces company managers. Cases are typically written by business school professors to be used in business courses<sup>27</sup>. Sometimes they describe a specific business problem that the author was hired as a consultant to study, other times they discuss fictional companies for the purpose of illustrating important real business issues. Users of *Business Assignments*, for example, discuss the business plan for a UK supplier of sportswear. The debate centers around which decisions should be made centrally, which locally, around global strategy versus the need for

---

<sup>25</sup> There is still place for individual student work in TBL, e.g. in Prabhu's *Communicational Teaching Project*. It can help foster independence and autonomy, and caters to individual differences in students, i.e. their personalities and learning styles. It is worth remembering that not all learners are positively disposed towards working together on tasks. Prabhu (1987) claims that student-student interaction may result in pidginized use of L2 and interlanguage fossilization. In his opinion, some students find it more humiliating to make mistakes in front of their peers than in front of the teacher. Group discussions can become very noisy and disruptive. Students may contribute very unequally to the completion of the task, with some learners trying to dominate and others freeloading by getting their peers to do the work for them. There is also the risk that students will overuse their L1 or engage in off-task talk. (Jacobs 1998).

<sup>26</sup> Attention to form can occur in any or all of the phases of a task-based lesson. There is a wide spectrum of tools available for teachers to draw their students' attention to form during the lesson: review of learner errors, consciousness-raising tasks, production-practice activities and noticing activities (Ellis 2003).

<sup>27</sup> A lot of useful material can be found in *Directory of Cases and Related Materials 1985-86*. Boston: Harvard Business School or in *Harvard Business Review*, published by Harvard Business School. With less advanced students it is recommended to use mini-case studies, e.g. Huggett, R. 1990. *Business Case Studies*. Cambridge: CUP.

responsiveness to local market idiosyncracies. Students discuss the problem whether Cougar brand should be positioned – as up-market high price sportswear or not.

The business case study approach fits comfortably within ESP since it is task based, and involves learners in both individual and group work. There is challenge, participation and the use of professional know-how<sup>28</sup>. As a tool for teaching English, case studies combine many of the latest techniques currently advocated by researchers and practitioners in the profession. They teach language through content rather than through grammatical or lexical exercises. Content material is business-related, and thus of greater relevance and interest to the student in a business language class<sup>29</sup>. Case studies are often authentic materials which present the students with actual business problems to analyze and solve. Besides including business concepts, cases may also contain valuable cultural information. They constitute an integrated skills approach that develops oral and aural skills, reading and writing. Vocabulary is introduced and practiced in context while grammatical structures can be studied in the case and practised in a variety of supplemental exercises. The class is learner-centered, as students assume some of the responsibility for the direction of a class discussion and for their own learning. Learning activities center on problem-solving and situational analysis instead of question-answer or close-ended exercises, and tend to develop critical reasoning skills. Students' tasks are to identify the problem at hand, discuss the case situation and its implications, propose and defend alternative solutions, react to classmates' criticisms and suggestions, and ultimately choose an appropriate course of action.

It is worth mentioning that in the case study approach the teacher functions as a facilitator in engaging students and a resource person in providing vocabulary and language feedback. S/he cedes authority and allows the students to bear a greater share of responsibility for their own academic preparation. At the same time, the teacher has to be continually hovering in the background, guiding the students, making suggestions and providing further insights. The instructor must finally put all of the pieces together to help the students understand what they have learned. Using case studies demands a great deal of attentiveness on the part of the instructor. It is easy for students to get side tracked, to become frustrated with the ambiguity inherent in an unsolved case. Some students will wonder how they are learning English by simply discussing business problems. As a result, the instructor must continually be alert and

---

<sup>28</sup> Since business revolves around four professional skills, e.g. presentations, negotiations, meetings and phone calls, it is necessary to teach these skills to pre-experienced and low-experienced learners. Oxford Business English Skills series will be of great help (see: Sobkowiak, P. 2002. "Business English Skills – recenzja serii audiowizualnych kursów *Business English*" w *Języki Obce Szkole* 5. 174-6.)

<sup>29</sup> The author of this article carried out a comprehensible needs analysis of Business English students. The questionnaire was given to 132 graduates of Management and Marketing Faculty at A. Mickiewicz University in the year 2000. When asked about the five most favorable activity types, the respondents ranked communicative tasks highest. Case studies were favored by 83% of the informants.

ready to help students whether about business or English. It is also important for the teacher to appreciate students' expertise in business subjects. S/he should show respect for their knowledge and encourage its use. This will help establish equality in the relationship between teacher and students that will encourage students' participation.<sup>30</sup>

### *Final remarks*

In conclusion, TBL seems to help create an effective learning environment in the classroom since it meets three essential conditions necessary for successful learning: it provides learners with the exposure to the target language, maximizes opportunities for them to put their often limited language to genuine use and motivates students to get engaged in the learning process. In addition, focused instruction – drawing attention to language form – helps learners develop their proficiency more rapidly. Although no study has demonstrated that task-based teaching results in higher levels of language proficiency than teaching based on traditional linguistic syllabuses, there is some evidence that a meaning-centered approach is effective in developing proficiency and there is growing experimental evidence that the attention to form that arises from the negotiation of meaning in task-based activity promotes acquisition. Its high level of student involvement and use of authentic materials promote interest and motivation. With its focus on meaning, it seems to be tailor-made for ESP context. *Case study*, a variation of learning by doing, provides ample opportunities for the student not only to learn the language, but also to develop important communicative, professional and academic skills. That is why more attempts should be made to adopt this kind of teaching in the institutional context, such as high schools or universities. Besides, truly task-based courses should be published to take away the burden of writing their own materials from teachers. All this will definitely contribute to create the necessary environment to facilitate language learning.

### REFERENCES

- Barron, C. 1992. "Material thoughts: ESP and culture". *English for Specific Purposes 10*. 173–187.
- Batstone, R. 1994. *A Scheme for Teacher Education: Grammar*. Oxford: OUP.
- Bloor, M. and John, M.J. 1988. "Project writing: The marriage of process and process". In

---

<sup>30</sup> As for the knowledge of the discipline, it is best to adopt the attitude of an intelligent observer and disclaim any special expertise. It will help a great deal if a teacher can develop an informed interest in the discipline and communicate this interest to his/her trainees. In such a setting the students will immediately feel that they have something of value to contribute. In general, students are much more likely to speak if they feel they have some authority and a worthwhile contribution to make. Thus, the teacher's role is to concentrate on comprehension and accurate use of vocabulary, pronunciation, sentence grammar, etc. while the communicative content becomes the responsibility of the students.

- Robinson, P. (ed.). 1988. 85-94
- Breen, M. 1989. "The evaluation cycle for language learning tasks" in R.K Johnson (ed.): *The Second Language Curriculum*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Bygate, M., Skehan, P., and Swain, M. (eds.). 2001. *Researching Pedagogic Tasks, Second Language Learning, Teaching and Testing*. Harlow: Longman.
- Canale, M. 1983. "From communicative competence to language pedagogy". In J. Richards and R. Schmidt (eds.).
- Candlin, C. and Murphy, D. 1987. *Language Learning Tasks*. Englewood Cliffs N.J.: Prentice Hall International.
- Ellis, G. and Sinclair, B. 1989. *Learning to Learn English*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Ellis, R. 2003. *Task-based Language Learning and Teaching*. Oxford: OUP.
- Herbolich, J.B. 1985. "Box kites". In Swales, J. (ed.). 1985. 132-4.
- Hyltenstam, K. and Pienemann, M. (eds.). 1985. *Modeling and Assessing Second Language Acquisition*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Jacobs, G. 1998. "Cooperative learning or just grouping students: the difference makes a difference". In Renandya, W. and Jacobs, G. (eds.). pp. 145- 71.
- Krashen, S. 1981. *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Long, M. 1985. "A role for instruction in second language acquisition: task-based language teaching" in Hyltenstam, K. and Pienemann, M. (eds.).
- Long, M. 1996. "The role of the linguistic environment in second language acquisition" in W. Ritchie and T. Bhatia (eds.). 1996. pp.413-68.
- Moskowitz, G. 1977. *Caring and Sharing in the Foreign Language Class*. Rowley, MA.: Newbury House.
- Nunan, D. 1989. *Designing Tasks for the Communicative Classroom*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Prabhu, N.S. 1987. *Second Language Pedagogy*. Oxford: OUP.
- Reeve, N. and Wright, C. 1996. *Linguistic Auditing. A Guide to Identifying Foreign Language Communication Needs in Corporations*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Renandya, W. and Jacobs, G. 1998. *Learners and Language Learning*. Singapore: SEAMEO.
- Richards, J., Platt, J., and Weber, H. 1985. *Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics*. London: Longman.
- Richards, J. and Schmidt, R. 1983. *Language and Communication*. London: Longman.
- Ritchie, W. and Bhatia, T. (eds.). 1996. *Handbook of Second Language Acquisition*. San Diego: Academic Press.
- Robinson, P. (ed.). 1988. *Academic Writing: Process and Product*. ELT Documents 129.

London: The British Council.

Swales, J. 1985. *Episodes in ESP*. Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall.

Willis, J. 1996. *A Framework for Task-Based Learning*. Harlow: Longman.

Yuan, F. and Ellis, R. 2003. "The effects of pre-task planning and on-line planning on fluency, complexity and accuracy in L2 oral production". *Applied Linguistics*

*Appendix 1*

Language Profile of: J. Smith

Post and Function: Purchasing Clerk

Company: Automotive Components Ltd. Birmingham

**ACTIVITY: Purchasing and ordering from Foreign Suppliers**



<b>CONTENT (Topic Area/ Lexical Field)</b>	Disc uss pur chase s with supp liers	Plac es rou tine orde rs	Ack no wle dge s rece ipt of goo ds	Calls for progr ess, repor ts on order	Ente rtain s supp liers	Rea ds spec ialis t artic les	Draft s repor ts for supp liers	Parti cipat es in smal l meet ings with
Automotive Component terms	xxx		xxx	x	x	xxx	xxx	xxx
Dates/Times	xxx	xxx	xxx		x		xxx	xx
Quantities	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	x	x	xxx	xx
Materials specifications	xxx		x	xxx	x		xxx	xxx
Delivery issues	x	xxx	xxx		xx	xxx	xxx	xxx
Suppliers production problems					xxx		xx	xxx
Order forms/Invoices	xxx			xxx				
Letters with technical content		x	x				xxx	
Social conversation					xxx			x

X = occasionally; XX = regularly; XXX = frequently

Figure 2: The Foreign Language Needs Analysis Grid