

Task-Based Instruction: From Concepts to the Classroom

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This paper presents an overview of Task Based Instruction (TBI). I provide a brief definition, the language theory behind TBI, and TBI's advantages and disadvantages. A teaching unit is included to illustrate this method. The choice of activities is based on interviews with two non-native (Japanese) speakers of English and their personal challenges in using an American post office.

Task-based instruction is different from other more traditional methods of language teaching. Lessons are constructed according to the language required to perform specific tasks rather than according to the aspects of language such as structures and vocabulary. According to Ramirez (1995), solving these tasks means that learning the target language will be the means to an end rather than the goal itself. This assumes that students will learn the language structures through induction as they focus on task completion and meaning. Students' interaction during the tasks facilitates transfer of information they have previously learned and incorporates it with new information they receive as they perform the task. Connecting tasks to real-life situations contextualizes language in a meaningful way and provides large amounts of input and feedback (Krahnke, 1987).

The tasks chosen for a language lesson can be academic or non-academic in nature. Non-academic tasks like buying and selling movie tickets, going on a shopping trip, or making a phone call may be useful for adult learners who want to learn enough English to converse and integrate into the target culture quickly (Ramirez, 1995). More academic tasks could be writing term papers for content-area classes or completing reports of the kind required of high school or college students (Krahnke, 1987).

TBI is based on Krashen's language acquisition hypothesis. Krahnke (1987) restates it thus: the theory asserts "the ability to use a language is gained through

exposure to and participation in using it, that experience, not training, is necessary" (p. 59). Krahnke goes on to explain that TBI develops "communicative competence, including linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence" (p. 59). Processing the information used during specific tasks through understandable input provides students with linguistic and sociolinguistic competence. Discourse competence is gained by the different types of language students use to accomplish the tasks. Finally, "strategic competence, or the ability to use communicative strategies, is acquired through the need for understanding during the interaction required to accomplish the tasks" (p. 59).

When planning a task-based unit, teachers can do it alone, work with other teachers, or involve the students in the process. Students can help determine the content by sharing their needs. For example, in an adult education situation, teachers can ask students what kinds of transactions they most want to learn to do in the target language. These transactions may be anything from learning how to make a doctor's appointment to filling out a job application.

Ramirez (1995) recommends four major points to consider during the planning stage:

1. The purpose of the task (e.g., find the main idea in a story or practice a certain grammatical feature).
2. The content of the task (e.g., skills needed to make a phone call or go shopping).
3. How the task is accomplished (e.g., recall and/or transfer of previously learned information or skills).
4. Location where the task is performed (in class, outside class, or at home for homework) (p. 88).

Once the teaching unit is planned, the tasks can be approached in two ways. The first is to teach the students the correct vocabulary and language structures in order to carry out the assigned task. Then, the next step is to have them perform the task (Ramirez, 1995). The second way is to give the students a task without the previous knowledge of the language they would need. The language is “discovered by students and provided by teachers” as the task is carried out (Krahnke, 1987). This second scenario could make some students uncomfortable. On the other hand, it could be successful for adult learners who are at an advanced level and possess a high degree of motivation and are at ease with taking risks in the target language. Teachers should consider whether or not this second method can be effective for their particular group of students.

There are advantages and disadvantages to task-based instruction. The advantages are numerous. First of all, TBI is suitable for all ages and backgrounds, especially young learners. All children have learned their L1 in a contextualized setting, learning grammar and structure inductively. Their focus is on meaning, not form. A special consideration for these learners is that their language skills are still developing and teachers must be careful to create appropriate tasks for their level (Bourke, 2006).

Some other advantages of TBI are that it can be used to teach content as well as language, can be combined with more traditional teaching methods, can provide motivation due to tasks being relevant and immediate, and can be a useful method for students who don't do well in more traditional types of classroom learning or where teachers have little autonomy over their lesson planning (Krahnke, 1987).

As for the disadvantages, a major one is that TBI requires a high level of creativity

and initiative on the part of the teacher. There are some resources in the ESL field for TBI tasks, e.g., *Experiential Language Teaching Techniques* by Michael Jerald and Raymond C. Clark, but the onus remains on the teachers to create meaningful lessons for their particular students' needs. In an EFL situation, there is a bigger challenge since comprehensible target language input is limited. However, the use of authentic materials and contact with native speakers can help. Other disadvantages are that students may prefer more traditional types of teaching. TBI relies heavily on student motivation and commitment. Students who are used to a teacher-fronted classroom with little interaction on their part, might feel uncomfortable, and even unwilling to take some of the language risks involved in completing the tasks, especially if the tasks occur outside the classroom. Another difficulty is that teachers will probably find evaluating students' performance in TBI challenging unless a specific rubric for assessment is created (Krahnke, 1987).

In weighing these pros and cons of task-based teaching, I believe it would be beneficial to integrate this method with the more traditional methods that include a focus on language form. Language acquisition is a complex process, and TBI is one good way to connect form with meaning, comprehensible input and context of use.

Next, I will attempt to apply the principles of TBI to a teaching unit developed for adult students at the intermediate level in an ESL environment. My particular target students are a group of ten students from several different countries studying at the English Language Services Center in Honolulu, Hawai'i. The task they will be preparing for is to mail a package to their home country at the local post office.

Lesson 1

Preparation and Observation

Activity 1: Opening (5 min.)

1. Explain to Ss that they will be preparing and mailing a package to their families in their home country at the post office. This experience will help them to know how to use the post office when they need to go again in the future.
2. Explain that they will first go to the post office just to observe. Then in a couple of days, they will mail their package.
3. Assure Ss that you (the teacher) will give them what they need so that they should be able to do it without much trouble.

Activity 2: Vocabulary (15 min.)

1. Hand out vocabulary word list (see Appendix A, “Post Office Vocabulary”).
2. Explain that these are the words they may hear when they observe at the post office.
3. Show Ss stamps, letters, envelopes, a package, bubble envelope, customs forms, and a money order. Ask Ss if they know the names of these items, share with the class. Explain any vocabulary they don’t know, especially, *a book/sheet of stamps*.
4. Explain terms such as *fourth class, first class (regular), air mail, express mail, priority mail, insurance, delivery confirmation, liquid, potentially hazardous, fragile and perishable*.
5. The teacher may want to draw pictures next to words to help Ss remember meaning, or have Ss draw pictures.

Activity 3: Addressing a letter/package (5 min.)

1. Give out the hand-out “How to Address Mail” (See Appendix A).
2. Have Ss write their own address information on a separate sheet of paper so they can address their package at home that night.

Activity 4: Getting to know the transactions at the post office (20 min.)

1. Have Ss look at the “Sample Conversations” hand-out (see Appendix B).
2. As a class, write in any additions/changes needed in the conversation dialog based on what expressions were heard.
3. Have Ss read the conversations in pairs. Have them switch roles.
4. Explain *next in line*, and the similarity between *Will there be anything else?* and *Will that be all?*
5. Ask if Ss have any questions.
6. Check Ss’ addresses for correct information while they are going over the dialogs.

Activity 5: Homework 1: Observing at the Post Office (10 min.)

1. Explain what Ss will typically find at a post office (forms, boxes, envelopes). Explain the meaning of *One Line Forms Here* and *windows*.
2. Send Ss to the post office in pairs or individually to observe the language used by the mail clerks and customers.

3. Ss take notes of the conversations between customers and clerks and write down any questions they have for the teacher in the next class.

(Alternatively, if the class is small, the teacher can take Ss to a nearby post office to observe how language is used by customers and mail clerks. The teacher needs to arrange this with the post office ahead of time.)

Activity 6: Homework 2: Selecting an item to mail (5 min.)

1. Have Ss buy a small present from Hawaii to mail to their family (e.g. keychain, candy, etc.).
2. Find or buy the box or bubble envelope they want to mail presents in. They can find the box or bubble envelope at Long's Drug Store or Fisher's.

Lesson 2

Discussion and Practice

Activity 1: Review vocabulary (10 min.)

1. Review vocabulary words.
2. Give Ss the "Post Office Matching Vocabulary" (see Appendix C).
3. Have Ss work alone to try to match the vocabulary words with their definitions. (Books closed, papers put away.)
4. Put Ss into pairs to check answers with a partner.
5. Give out answer sheets to check if answers are correct.

Activity 2: Discussion on post office observation (5 min.)

1. Ask Ss what expressions they heard at the post office and write on the board what they say.
2. Answer students' questions if any.

Activity 3: Studying Role-Play Conversations (15 min.)

1. Give Ss "Fill-in-the-gap Conversations" handout (see Appendix D).
2. In pairs, have Ss fill in the gaps with words from the word choices on the handout.
3. Go over answers as a class.
4. Explain grammar structure.

A. I'd like to _____ (idiom, more polite).

B. I want to _____.

Explain how *I need to*, *I'd like to*, *I want to* all mean basically the same when asking to buy something.

Activity 4: Practice Role-Play Conversations (10 min.)

1. Have Ss practice role play with their partner using the same handout (Appendix D). Switch roles.

Activity 5: Asking for Clarification (5 min.)

1. Go over questions that Ss can ask at the post office if they don't understand what the mail clerk says.
 - a. *I'm sorry, could you repeat that?*
 - b. *I'm sorry, I didn't understand you.*
 - c. *What does _____ mean?*
 - d. *How do you spell that?*
 - e. *Would you say that more slowly, please?*

Activity 6: Practicing Asking for Clarification (10 min.)

1. Have Ss practice conversation in pairs, this time using the different questions to ask for clarification.

Activity 7: Homework (5 min.)

1. Ss should familiarize themselves with Conversation 2 enough to feel comfortable using the language when they go to the post office tomorrow.
2. Bring bubble envelope/package with addresses written on it to take to the post office.

Lesson 3

Going to the Post Office

Activity 1: Fill out customs forms to put on packages (10 min.)

1. Pass out green and white customs forms for mailing packages overseas.
2. Using the overhead projector, help Ss to fill out customs forms.

Activity 2: Preparing for trip to Post Office (5 min.)

1. Put Ss into pairs so they can go to the post office window together to mail their packages.
2. If any Ss have forgotten their package, pair them with someone who brought one.

Activity 3: Go to the Post Office (30 min.)

1. Have Ss walk with you to the post office.
2. Have Ss mail their packages in pairs. (If possible, have Ss record their conversations with the mail clerk for review and reflection.)
3. Monitor and help those that need help.
4. Walk back to the classroom.

Activity 4: Discuss Post Office Experience (10 min.)

1. If energy is high, discuss as a class the following questions. (If energy is lower, put Ss into groups.)
 - a. *Did the trip work out like you expected?*
 - b. *What problems did you have?*
 - c. *What part of the experience went well?*
 - d. *Did you learn any new words?*

2. Write down the problems, things that went well, and the new words on the board in columns as Ss share them. (If Ss are in groups, have each group report to the class while you write on the board.)

Activity 5: Homework. (5 min.)

1. Have Ss write a one-paragraph journal about this experience. Give them “Journal of Post Office Experience” hand-out (see Appendix E).

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I would like to thank Ryoko Tsubaki and Mika Yunoki for their time and efforts in focusing my attention on some of the challenges that foreign students can face in mailing a package at an American post office. Their keen understanding of some of the difficulties of this task and their personal support was invaluable.

References

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APPENDIX A

POST OFFICE VOCABULARY

Stamps	First Class
Mail	4 th Class
Postage	Insurance
Envelope	Delivery Confirmation
Bubble envelope	Perishable
Address	Liquid
Customs form	Potentially hazardous
Package	Air Mail
Money Order	Express Mail
Fragile	Priority Mail

HOW TO ADDRESS MAIL

FROM:

Name: *John Smith*

Street, Apt. #: *935 Hotel St.*

City, State, Zip Code: *Honolulu, HI 96819*

Country: *USA*

TO:

Name: *Hiroko Nakamura*

Street, Apt. #: *10-6-2 Sagamioka*

City: *Zama*

Prefecture, Zip Code: *Kanagawa 228-0001*

Country: *JAPAN*

APPENDIX B

SAMPLE CONVERSATIONS

Mail Clerk: May I help you?
Customer: Yes. I want to buy some stamps.
Mail Clerk: That will be \$8.40.
Customer: (Gives Mail Clerk money.) Okay.
Mail Clerk: Will there be anything else?
Customer: No, thank you.

Mail Clerk: Next in line, please.
Customer: I'd like to mail this package.
Mail Clerk: Is there anything liquid, perishable, fragile, or potentially hazardous? (used when mailing packages only)
Customer: No.
Mail Clerk: How would you like this sent?
Customer: Air Mail please.
Clerk: Would you like insurance?
Customer: Yes, please.
Mail Clerk: What is the value?
Customer: \$50.00.
Mail Clerk: Will that be all?
Customer: Yes, thank you.
Mail Clerk: That will be \$12.95.
Customer: (Gives money to Mail Clerk) Thank you.
Mail Clerk: You're welcome.

APPENDIX C

POST OFFICE MATCHING VOCABULARY

- | | |
|---|--------------------------|
| 1. ____ Something used to mail a letter | a. Delivery Confirmation |
| 2. ____ Letters and packages | b. perishable |
| 3. ____ Something to put a letter in | c. address |
| 4. ____ Something to put big items in | d. stamps |
| 5. ____ Forms that tell what is inside a package | e. insurance |
| 6. ____ This is mailed instead of cash | f. bubble envelope |
| 7. ____ Slowest and cheapest mail | g. mail |
| 8. ____ Form used to make sure a package arrives safely | h. money order |
| 9. ____ Envelope with plastic padding inside | i. fragile |
| 10. ____ Dangerous | j. package |
| 11. ____ City, State, Zip Code | k. envelope |
| 12. ____ Food that decays (goes bad) quickly | l. postage |
| 13. ____ The fastest mail | m. Customs forms |
| 14. ____ The price for mailing a letter | n. First Class |
| 15. ____ Not solid or gas; like water | o. Express Mail |
| 16. ____ Regular mail | p. hazardous |
| 17. ____ Faster than regular mail, cheaper than Express | q. Air Mail |
| 18. ____ What you buy if something breaks so you
can get your money back | r. liquid |
| 19. ____ Easily broken | s. 4 th Class |
| 20. ____ Mail that is sent by airplane | t. Priority Mail |

Answer key:

1- d; 2- g; 3- k; 4- j; 5- m; 6- h; 7- s; 8- a; 9- f; 10- p; 11- c; 12- b; 13- o; 14- l; 15- r; 16- n; 17- t; 18- e; 19- i; 20- q.

APPENDIX D

FILL-IN-THE-GAP CONVERSATIONS

Fill in the gaps in the following conversations. You can use the words given in “Word Choices” below or use your own words.

Conversation 1

Mail Clerk: May I _____ you?
Customer: Yes. I want to buy some _____.
Mail Clerk: That will be \$_____.
Customer: (Gives Mail Clerk money.) _____.
Mail Clerk: Will there be _____?
Customer: _____.

Conversation 2

Mail Clerk: _____, please.
Customer: I'd like to _____.
Mail Clerk: Is there anything liquid, _____, _____, or potentially hazardous?
(used when mailing packages only)
Customer: _____.
Mail Clerk: How would you like this sent? Would you like _____?
Customer: Yes, _____ with _____.
Mail Clerk: What is the _____?
Customer: \$_____.
Mail Clerk: Will that _____?
Customer: Yes, _____.
Mail Clerk: That will be \$_____. OR: Oh, and I need _____ too.
Customer: (Gives money to Mail Clerk) _____.
Mail Clerk: _____.

Word Choices

insurance	buy an envelope
help	buy a money order
No, thank you.	a book of stamps
anything else	First Class
perishable	4 th Class
be all	Express Mail
stamps	a bubble envelope
three 94 cent stamps	Delivery Confirmation
mail a package	mail a letter
Okay. Thanks.	fragile
next in line	Yes, thank you.
Air Mail	Here you are.
You're welcome.	value

ANSWER KEY
FILL-IN-THE-GAP CONVERSATIONS

Conversation 1

Mail Clerk: May I help you?
Customer: Yes. I want to buy some stamps.
Mail Clerk: That will be \$8.40.
Customer: (Gives Mail Clerk money.) Here you are.
Mail Clerk: Will there be anything else?
Customer: No, thank you.

Conversation 2

Mail Clerk: Next in line, please.
Customer: I'd like to mail a package.
Mail Clerk: Is there anything liquid, perishable, fragile, or potentially hazardous? (used when mailing packages only)
Customer: No.
Mail Clerk: How would you like this sent? Would you like insurance?
Customer: Yes, Air Mail with insurance.
Mail Clerk: What is the value?
Customer: \$50.00.
Mail Clerk: Will that be all?
Customer: Yes, thank you.
Mail Clerk: That will be \$12.95.
OR: Oh, and I need a book of stamps, too.
Customer: (Gives money to Mail Clerk) Thanks.
Mail Clerk: You're welcome.

APPENDIX E

JOURNAL OF POST OFFICE EXPERIENCE

Please write one or two paragraphs of how you felt about the trip to the post office today. Here are some questions to answer. Feel free to add your own thoughts.

1. How did you feel about the trip? Scared? Excited? Nervous? Confident?
2. Did you feel you were well prepared to do this task? If not, what did you need to know?
3. Did you think you did this task well?
4. Do you feel more confident about going to the post office again by yourself to mail something?
5. Do you think you could help another classmate use the post office now?
6. What would you do differently the next time you go to the post office? You may want to list the specific expressions you want to use.
7. How is the post office transaction you just completed different from a similar transaction in your culture and your language?