METHODOLOGY · TBLT

TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING

Understanding the approach behind the lesson shape

AT A GLANCE

What it is	An approach in which **tasks** (activities focused on meaning, with a communicative outcome) are the central unit of teaching, instead of a list of grammar or vocabulary items.
Also called	Task-Based Learning (TBL), Task-Based Instruction
Best for	developing learners' ability to communicate, especially in speaking and writing
Direction	meaning first; attention to language grows out of the task
Lesson shape	Pre-task > Task > Post-task
Plan it with	the **Task-Based Learning – Speaking** and **Task-Based Learning – Writing** frameworks

The thinking behind TBLT

TBLT is often seen as an extension of the **communicative approach**: the goal of teaching is meaningful, authentic communication. It draws on several ideas.

Idea	What it means for the lesson
Experiential learning	Learners learn by doing: they use language to get things done.
Sociocultural theory	Interaction is the basis for learning, and language is a communicative activity.
Whole language	Language is learned as a whole, not as a series of isolated parts.
Learner-centred teaching	Teaching responds to learners' needs and priorities.

What is a task?

Definitions vary, but most authors agree that a task:

- is **focused on meaning**: learners are concerned with understanding and expressing messages
- reflects **real-world language use**, as in everyday life, work or study
- **engages thinking**, for example through reasoning or problem solving
- has a clear **communicative outcome**, not the display of correct language

These features distinguish a task from an **exercise**.

	Exercise	Task
Main focus	form	meaning
Language	specified by the activity	chosen by learners
Success means	correct language	achieving the outcome
Example	*Put the verbs in brackets into the past simple.*	*Tell your partner about an embarrassing moment. Together, decide whose story was more embarrassing.*

For the criteria of a good task and a list of task types with examples, see the **Practice Activities** handout.

Strong and weak versions

Within TBLT, there are two broad views.

	Task-based (strong)	Task-supported (weak)
The syllabus is...	made up of tasks only	organised around language items, with tasks as a key activity
Language focus...	grows out of the task	may be planned in advance and supported by tasks
Typical sequence	task first, then a focus on language	some focus on language or skills before the task, more after it

How our frameworks fit. The eltMate **Task-Based Learning** frameworks are closer to the **task-supported** version. The Noticing stage draws learners' attention to useful sub-skills and strategies before the task, while most language work happens after it, in the Language Focus stage. The **Task–Teach–Task** frameworks move closer to the strong version, because the teaching responds entirely to the first task.

How it works

PRE-TASK	1	**PREPARE** Introduce the topic and task, and help learners get ready to do it.
TASK	2	**DO THE TASK** Learners complete the task, using their own language resources.
POST-TASK	3	**REFLECT AND IMPROVE** Focus on language, report on the task, and repeat or extend it.

A TBLT lesson always includes the main task. The pre-task and post-task stages are flexible. These are some of the options.

Pre-task	Task	Post-task
understand the context and the task objective	with or without input (e.g. pictures, texts, language from the pre-task)	analyse a model of others doing the task
analyse a model of others doing the task	with time pressure (for fluency) or without (for accuracy and complexity)	analyse and practise language used in the task
look at language useful for the task	with a surprise element halfway through (e.g. some dinner guests turn out to be vegetarian)	report the outcome to the class
do the same or a similar task		repeat the same or a similar task
plan or rehearse		reflect on the performance and set goals

Attention to language

Versions of TBLT give grammar teaching different roles, but most authors agree that drawing learners' attention to **form** and giving **language feedback** are useful. This can happen at any stage, and can be implicit or explicit.

When	Implicit (covert)	Explicit (overt)
Before the task (pre-emptive)	a model that contains useful language	highlighting useful language or strategies (e.g. a Noticing stage)
During the task (immediate)	recasts, clarification requests	brief reminders of useful language, quick corrections
After the task (delayed)	reformulating learners' language on the board	error correction, rules and patterns, consciousness-raising tasks

Accuracy, fluency and complexity

Task performance is often described in three ways: **accuracy** (producing correct language), **fluency** (producing language smoothly in real time) and **complexity** (producing more elaborate language). Learners may not improve all three at once; focusing on one can reduce attention to the others (Skehan 2018). Complexity matters because it shows that learners are **restructuring** their language system, which is essential to progress.

Task design affects the balance: **planning time** tends to improve complexity and fluency, and **repeating** a task tends to improve all three.

Designing and grading tasks

Ways to describe tasks

Dimension	One type	The other type
Purpose	**real-world**: replicates a real situation (e.g. booking a hotel room)	**pedagogic**: designed for the classroom (e.g. finding differences between two pictures)
Language	**focused**: designed to invite specific language (e.g. narrative tenses in an anecdote)	**unfocused**: language is hard to predict (e.g. agreeing how to reduce traffic)
Outcome	**open**: any reasonable solution (e.g. ranking countries by preference)	**closed**: one correct solution (e.g. ranking countries by size)
Skills	**input**: mainly listening or reading (e.g. tracing a route on a map)	**output**: mainly speaking or writing (e.g. telling a story)
Interaction	**one-way**: one learner has the information (e.g. giving a presentation)	**two-way**: all learners contribute (e.g. agreeing on an issue)

Making tasks easier or harder

Factor	Easier	Harder
Language demands	language support or input is provided	learners rely on their own resources
Thinking demands	little reasoning (e.g. listing)	more reasoning (e.g. solving a problem, justifying a decision)
Performance conditions	familiar task, planning time, rehearsal	new task, no planning time, time pressure

A lesson in action

A 60-minute task-supported speaking lesson, following the **Task-Based Learning – Speaking** framework: booking a hotel room over the phone.

Stage	Time	What happens
Lead-in	5 min	Learners discuss: *Have you ever booked a hotel in English? What information does a receptionist need?*
Noticing	15 min	Learners listen to a model booking, tick the expressions they hear, then find where communication broke down and how the speakers solved it.
Task preparation	5 min	Learners read their role cards and note key words.
Speaking task	10 min	Learners role-play the booking. The teacher notes useful and problematic language.
Language focus	15 min	The teacher boards two effective expressions and two that need work. Learners improve them, and the class looks at pronunciation.
Task repetition	10 min	Learners swap roles, take new role cards and repeat the task with a new partner, then reflect on what they did better.

Another option: Willis's task cycle

Willis (1996) proposes a framework closer to the strong version. After a short **pre-task**, the **task cycle** has three steps: learners do the **task** in pairs or groups, **plan** how to report it, and **report** it to the class. Only then comes the **language focus**: learners **analyse** language from texts or recordings of the task, then **practise** it.

Benefits and challenges

Benefits	Challenges
It reflects how language is used outside the classroom.	Designing good tasks takes time and skill.
It puts meaning first and encourages creativity and experimentation.	Teachers need to give up some control.
It increases interaction and the amount of language learners use.	It can be hard to decide what to teach in response to learners' needs.
It can improve accuracy, fluency and complexity.	It may not suit contexts where learners expect formal instruction.
It offers opportunities for implicit and incidental learning.	Learners may avoid difficult language and rely on what they already know.
It responds to learners' emerging needs.	Without feedback, errors may fossilise.
Real-life tasks can be very motivating.	Coursebook material often needs adapting, and progress can be harder to assess.

Making it work

Make tasks meaningful, even when they're pedagogic

Real-world tasks are motivating, but pedagogic tasks (such as spot the difference) are useful too, as long as learners communicate for a real purpose and the outcome is clear.

Don't announce the language focus

With focused tasks, don't tell learners which language you expect them to use. If you do, they treat the task as an exercise and focus on displaying the language, rather than achieving the outcome with whatever resources they have.

Choose one-way and two-way tasks on purpose

One-way tasks are good for extended speaking or writing, as long as listeners or readers also have something to do. Two-way tasks create more negotiation of meaning, because everyone has to contribute.

Build in planning and repetition

Give learners time to plan before the task and a chance to repeat it afterwards. Both help learners move beyond fluency towards more accurate and more complex language.

Let one task inform the next

Use learners' performance to plan what to teach and which task to do next, and help learners reflect on their progress and set personal goals.

TEACHING TIP

A task with a clear outcome is the heart of every TBLT lesson. Before you plan anything else, check that learners will know when they've finished and whether they've succeeded.

Common pitfalls

Pitfall	What to do instead
The "task" is really an exercise ("Use the past simple to describe…").	Give learners a communicative outcome and let them choose the language.
You tell learners which language to use in a focused task.	Let the task create the need for the language, and focus on it afterwards.
The pre-task turns into a long grammar presentation.	Keep the pre-task short and focused on the task.
There is no focus on language after the task.	Always plan a language focus, based on what you noticed.
Learners only practise fluency.	Add planning time, repetition and feedback to work on accuracy and complexity.
The task is too difficult or too easy.	Adjust the language, thinking and performance demands.

ONLINE CLASSES

Breakout rooms work well for the task itself. Use a shared document or slide for the pre-task and for reporting outcomes, and record or note learners' language for the post-task focus. Collaborative tools, such as shared documents and digital whiteboards, are ideal for writing tasks and for planning reports.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- In TBLT, tasks focused on meaning and a communicative outcome are the centre of teaching.
- A task is not an exercise: learners choose the language they need to achieve the outcome.
- The eltMate TBL frameworks follow a task-supported version, with some focus before the task and most after it.
- Attention to language matters, before, during or after the task, implicitly or explicitly.
- Planning time and repetition help learners develop accuracy and complexity, not just fluency.

WHERE NEXT

Task-Based Learning – Speaking and Writing (frameworks) planning a TBL lesson, step by step
Practice Activities task criteria and task types with examples
T-T-T (methodology) a step towards TBLT, with a reactive Teach stage
Error Correction implicit and explicit feedback during and after tasks

Further reading

Brown, H.D. (2001). *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy* (2nd ed.). White Plains, NY: Addison Wesley Longman. Chapter 3.

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