METHODOLOGY · T-T-T

TEST–TEACH–TEST & TASK–TEACH–TASK

Understanding the approach behind the lesson shape

AT A GLANCE

What it is	A lesson shape in which learners use language first, the teacher teaches what they turn out to need, and learners then use the language again, better.
Two versions	**Test–Teach–Test** for language systems (grammar, vocabulary, functions) and **Task–Teach–Task** for speaking and writing
Best for	language or skills learners have met before but don't yet use accurately or effectively
Direction	language use before language study
Lesson shape	Lead-in > Test or Task #1 > Teach > Test or Task #2
Plan it with	the **Test–Teach–Test**, **Task–Teach–Task Speaking** and **Task–Teach–Task Writing** frameworks

The thinking behind T-T-T

T-T-T turns the PPP sequence round: learners **use** the language before they **study** it. It draws on three ideas.

Idea	What it means for the lesson
Learning by doing	Learners learn through experience: they try something, reflect on it and try again.
Noticing the gap	When learners try to say or write something, they notice what they can't yet express. This makes them more ready to learn it (Swain 1995).
Reactive focus on form	The teacher focuses on grammar, vocabulary or pronunciation when a need appears during a meaning-focused activity, instead of deciding everything in advance (Long 1991).

Because the teaching responds to what learners actually do, T-T-T avoids spending time on what they already know. Thornbury (2006) describes it as a step towards **Task-Based Learning**: the further you move away from pre-selected language, the closer you get to TBL.

Two versions

The two versions share the same shape but start from a different place.

	Test–Teach–Test	Task–Teach–Task
Starting point	a pre-selected language item (e.g. the past simple)	a communicative task (e.g. booking a hotel room, writing a complaint)
First stage	a diagnostic test: what can learners already do with the item?	a first attempt at the task, or a first draft
Teach	the meaning, use, form and pronunciation that learners need	the sub-skills, strategies or genre features that learners need
Final stage	controlled practice (Test #2), then freer practice (Test #3)	the same or a similar task again, or a final draft
Framework	Test–Teach–Test	Task–Teach–Task Speaking Task–Teach–Task Writing

How it works

1. **LEAD-IN**
   Generate interest in the topic and set the context.
2. **TEST OR TASK #1** DIAGNOSTIC
   Learners use the target language or do the task with no input. The teacher monitors closely and notes what learners do well and what they need.
3. **TEACH** REACTIVE
   The teacher responds to what the first stage revealed, focusing only on what learners need.
4. **TEST OR TASK #2**
   Learners use the language or do the task again, applying what they have learned.

Stage	The teacher…	Learners…
Test or Task #1	sets up the activity, gives no language input and monitors closely, noting strengths and gaps	use what they already know and notice what they can't yet do
Teach	starts with examples from learners' own language, clarifies selectively and may use a model	compare their language with better alternatives and work out what to change
Test or Task #2	sets up the activity again (with new details), monitors and gives feedback	apply what they have learned and notice their own progress

Lessons in action

Test–Teach–Test · The past simple

A 60-minute lesson for learners who have met the past simple but make frequent mistakes with it. It uses the same example as the framework handout.

Stage	Time	What happens
Lead-in	5 min	In pairs, learners discuss: *When was your last holiday? Was it good or bad? Why?*
Test #1	10 min	Learners complete a gapped dialogue about a holiday: auxiliaries in questions and negatives, and regular and irregular past forms. They compare answers in pairs while the teacher monitors.
Teach	15 min	While checking the answers, the teacher clarifies only what caused problems, for example question forms and irregular verbs, using concept questions and the dialogue itself.
Test #2	10 min	Learners write six questions about past holidays and note their own answers.
Test #3	15 min	In new pairs, learners ask and answer their questions with follow-up questions, then decide whose holiday sounded more fun.
Feedback	5 min	The teacher praises good language and boards a few errors from Test #3 for learners to correct.

Task–Teach–Task · Booking a hotel room

A 60-minute speaking lesson for learners who can already make simple phone calls. It uses the same example as the Task–Teach–Task Speaking framework.

Stage	Time	What happens
Lead-in	5 min	Learners discuss: *Have you ever booked a hotel in English? What information does a receptionist need?*
Task preparation	5 min	Learners read their role cards and note key words. No language is taught.
Task #1	10 min	Learners role-play the phone booking. The teacher notes useful and problematic language, and any breakdowns in communication.
Teach	20 min	The teacher boards examples of learners' language. Learners listen to a model booking and compare: *Which expressions did the speakers use that you didn't?* They focus on spelling names, checking understanding and asking for repetition.
Task #2	10 min	Learners swap roles, take new role cards and repeat the booking with a new partner.
Feedback	10 min	The teacher gives feedback on language, and learners reflect: *What did you do better the second time?*

In both lessons, the Teach stage is **planned but flexible**: the teacher has prepared clarification and a model, but uses only what learners need. The second task uses **new details**, so learners repeat the task without simply repeating their answers.

Variations

How much to plan

In most T-T-T lessons, you choose the target language or sub-skills in advance and prepare a full Teach stage, then use only the parts learners need. In a more **deep-end** version, there is no pre-selected language at all: learners do a communicative task, and you teach whatever language needs emerge. This is very close to Task-Based Learning.

Teacher-led or learner-led Teach stage

A teacher-led Teach stage, built on examples from learners' own language, is usually the most efficient choice, because you can respond to needs selectively and in the moment. A learner-led stage, such as a guided discovery task with a model text, works well when many learners share the same gaps.

Benefits and challenges

Benefits	Challenges
Teaching responds to learners' real needs.	Learners who prefer to study before they use language may feel uncomfortable.
No time is wasted on what learners already know.	You need to spot needs quickly and decide what to teach on the spot.
Learners become aware of their own gaps.	Starting with a test can feel threatening, especially if the language is new.
Seeing a better performance in the second stage builds confidence.	Repeating the same task can feel repetitive if the details don't change.
It suits learners who enjoy learning by doing or testing themselves.	Learners who rely heavily on the teacher may find it hard.
It develops the teacher's ability to respond to emerging needs.	Lessons can seem less structured, and many coursebooks follow a different sequence.

Making it work

Choose language learners have met before

T-T-T works best when learners already know something about the target language or can partly do the task. Testing learners on something completely new can be demotivating. If the language is new, PPP is usually a better choice.

Make the first stage show what learners can do

Design Test #1 or Task #1 so that learners have to **use** the language, not just show what they know about the rules. A gapped dialogue or a role-play tells you more than a question about grammar terminology.

Plan a full Teach stage, then be selective

Prepare clarification of all the aspects learners might need, then teach only what the first stage showed was a problem. For some items this may be meaning, for others form or pronunciation. If you teach everything you planned regardless, you lose the point of T-T-T.

Keep one context and change the details

Use the same context throughout the lesson, but change the details for the second stage (new role cards, a new partner, a different situation), so learners have a reason to repeat the task.

Help learners see their progress

End with feedback that includes positive reinforcement, and ask learners to compare their two performances: *What did you do better? What would you still like to improve?*

> **TEACHING TIP**
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> Keep Task preparation light in Task–Teach–Task lessons. The first task shows you what learners need, so don't pre-teach the target language or give learners the structure of the text.

Common pitfalls

Pitfall	What to do instead
The first test is too hard, and learners feel they have failed.	Choose language learners have met, and frame the test as a chance to find out what they know.
The first test checks knowledge of rules, not use.	Design an activity that makes learners use the language.
You teach everything you planned, whatever happened in the first stage.	Teach selectively, based on what you noticed while monitoring.
You don't monitor closely enough in the first stage.	Note examples of learners' language as you monitor: they are the starting point for the Teach stage.
The Teach stage runs over, and there is no time for the second stage.	Time the Teach stage carefully: the second stage is where learners apply what they've learned.
The second task is identical to the first.	Change the details: new role cards, a new partner, a different situation.

> **ONLINE CLASSES**
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> Monitoring the first stage is the key challenge online. Visit breakout rooms, or ask learners to write in a shared document you can see, and note language as you go. Use a slide or the chat to share examples of learners' language in the Teach stage.

> **KEY TAKEAWAYS**
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> - T-T-T moves from using language to studying it, then using it again.
> - Test–Teach–Test is for language systems; Task–Teach–Task is for speaking and writing.
> - The first stage is diagnostic: monitor closely and note what learners need.
> - Plan a full Teach stage, but teach only what learners need.
> - Change the details in the second stage, and help learners see their progress.

WHERE NEXT

Test–Teach–Test (framework) planning a language systems lesson

Task–Teach–Task Speaking and Writing (frameworks) planning a skills lesson

PPP (methodology) the alternative when the language is new to learners

Task-Based Language Teaching (methodology) where T-T-T leads when language isn't pre-selected

Error Correction giving feedback on both stages

Guided Discovery a learner-led Teach stage

Further reading

Long, M.H. (1991). Focus on form: A design feature in language teaching methodology. In K. de Bot, R. Ginsberg & C. Kramsch (Eds.), *Foreign Language Research in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (pp. 39–52). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

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Swain, M. (1995). Three functions of output in second language learning. In G. Cook & B. Seidlhofer (Eds.), *Principle and Practice in Applied Linguistics* (pp. 125–144). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Thornbury, S. (2006). *An A–Z of ELT: A Dictionary of Terms and Concepts*. Oxford: Macmillan.

Woodward, T. (2001). *Planning Lessons and Courses*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Chapter 4.