



## 2. Task-Based Learning (TBL)

### 2.1 Introduction and clarification of terms

This section provides the theoretical background to Task-Based Language Learning (TBLL); a framework for TBLL with explanations; factors to consider when implementing task-based language learning; and finally, a concrete example of a task.

It shows how adapted versions of task-based approaches to language learning are well suited to the non-formal context of learning in the framework of European language programmes. This method relies heavily on learners' involvement and their world knowledge. It places emphasis on the value of the information and experiences which participants bring to the language learning sessions. As participants share their knowledge, experience and opinions, they will also be using their existing language, be exposed to new language and develop a variety of strategies for improving their language skills.

TBLL also allows the facilitator to use authentic topic material, which is relevant to the participants' needs and encourages the development of skills necessary for the successful completion of real-life tasks.

#### *Clarification of terms*

Linguistic jargon is notorious for its ambiguity. Different terms mean different things to different people. So for clarification, some of the key terms used in this publication are listed below, together with an explanation.

- **Activity** Doing something which can be seen as a step towards achieving the task; one part of the process; work in progress.
- **Collaborative learning** Working together and supporting each other to maximise learning and task outcomes. It is the opposite of competitive learning where each learner is trying to be better than his companions.
- **Language facilitator** The person who has a native speaker competence in the language being learnt and can provide all the necessary linguistic input to facilitate the activities and task achievement.
- **Learner-centred** Describes an approach to classroom methodology which puts learners' needs and interests at the centre of the learning programme.

- **Learning styles/strategies** A range of ways of studying and learning, along the spectrum from experiential to studious. (See Section 1.2 Roles of learners and facilitators).
- **Materials** Anything which is used to form the basis of a language learning activity or task.
- **Task** The end product to a planned process; a completed piece of work
- **Topic** Any subject which provides contextualised language learning.

### 2.2 Task-Based Language Learning (TBLL)

#### *2.2.1 Background to Task-Based Language Learning*

##### **Language acquisition and learning: How is it done?**

There is no definitive model for learning a language or indeed for the acquisition of language by children. Research has suggested that human beings are born with a device which enables them to organise the language they are exposed to (their mother tongue) and form rules which can be used to generate more language and be applied in different situations (LAD: language acquisition device and Universal Grammar, Chomsky 1965). Yet there is also research to show that even *without* the stimuli of exposure to a language, deaf children develop language which displays similar features of a formal language structure (Goldin-Meadow 1990). This has also been shown through the study of Pidgin languages – languages that are formed by people who have no common mother tongue but who need to communicate among themselves and so form another language. The first intrepid explorers and international traders relied on pidgin communication. When pidgins are used as a native language by the next generation, they develop into a Creole language (Bickerton 1984) and a new language is formed by people who were exposed to a language which



did not display a full range of structures. This is known as *poverty of stimulus* (Gleason and Ratner 1998). Some theories also relate the cognitive development of children to their language acquisition. This is another major difference between mother-tongue acquisition and learning a second language which is usually undertaken after childhood cognitive development is complete. (Bates 1979, Piaget 1926).

This is a very cursory dip into this area to demonstrate that nothing is finite in language learning or acquisition theory. Also, it must be remembered that we are attempting to develop ideas for language learning not language acquisition. It is therefore important to bear in mind the difference between language acquisition of mother tongue and second language learning later in life. As mentioned in Section 1.1 Language learning and language teaching, there have also been many theories of language learning, which have been reflected in approaches and methodologies in language teaching.

### **Learner-centred approaches**

Learner-centred approaches draw knowledge from the learner, working through their needs and interests and selecting materials, activities and tasks accordingly. At all stages, negotiation between facilitators and learners is encouraged. Learning is seen as a collaborative enterprise. Any approach must consider the context in which it is to be used and consequently the possible reaction of learners to the methodology. Are learners going to accept the choice of methodology with open arms? If the proposed methodology is unfamiliar or greeted with foreboding, facilitators will need to negotiate with learners to ensure that they are motivated and happy to learn in that way. The learners will then be stakeholders in the approach. Of primary concern therefore is that facilitators take into account the learning environment they are working in and manage new approaches sensitively. (See Section 1.2 Roles of learners and facilitators.)

### **2.2.2 Task-Based Language Learning**

In Task-Based Language Learning (TBLL), learning is fostered through performing a series of

activities as steps towards successful task realisation. The focus is away from learning language items in a non-contextualised vacuum to using language as a vehicle for authentic, real-world needs. By working towards task realisation, the language is used immediately in the real-world context of the learner, making learning authentic. In a TBLL framework the language needed is not pre-selected and given to the learners who then practise it but rather it is drawn from the learners with help from the facilitator, to meet the demands of the activities and task.

TBLL relies heavily on learners actively experimenting with their store of knowledge and using skills of deduction and independent language analysis to exploit the situation fully. (See Section 2.4 Concrete example of task – Preparing a meal.) In this example, the aim of the session is to work together to prepare a meal where everyone can contribute. By doing this, a great deal of language will be activated under the theme of food. As can be seen by the example, menus have to be discussed, food has to be bought and jobs allocated. The participants are prepared for the task, so that they will be aware of the language they need in order to carry it out successfully.

In this approach, motivation for communication becomes the primary driving force. It places the emphasis on communicative fluency rather than the hesitancy borne of the pressure in more didactic approaches to produce unflawed utterances. Exposure to the target language should be in a naturally occurring context. This means that, if materials are used, they are not prepared especially for the language classroom, but are selected and adapted from authentic sources. (See Section 4 Selecting and using materials.)

The Task-Based Learning Framework shown below has been adapted from the Willis framework (1996). In the adapted framework, the focus of attention is upon a final task. This task is defined as an undertaking that is authentic to the needs of the learners.

In the case of European youth work programmes, these tasks will relate to the work of participants and will reflect the tasks and situations they find themselves involved in. An explanation of this framework follows the diagram.



### 2.2.3 Task-Based Methodology



#### Task-Based Methodology Framework

(Adapted from Willis, Jane 1996  
A Framework for Task-Based Learning,  
Oxford: Longman)

#### DEFINITION OF THE TASK

##### PRE-TASK

Willis suggests that the teacher (facilitator) 'explores the topic with the group and highlights useful words and phrases'. For facilitators wishing to exploit materials, it is at this stage that the chosen material will need to relate to the task. In preparing for the task fulfilment the facilitator will need to consider how the chosen piece of material will be exploited. Exploring the topic with the group could be by exploitation of a picture (see Section 3.2), by watching a video clip, (see Section 4) or by looking at a text (see Section 3.3). The material to be exploited can be used for topic content as a springboard or to highlight useful words and phrases. It is up to the facilitator to decide how much language work he/she thinks will be needed by the learners but it is necessary to remember that the purpose of using a piece of material is as a pre-task lead-in.

e.g.:

- material exploitation: using a picture/text etc. to lead into the topic
- brainstorming: making a list; comparing ideas; sharing experiences
- activating language: eliciting and providing vocabulary



PRE-TASK

TASK  
PREPARATION

TASK  
REALISATION

POST-TASK



## TASK PREPARATION

This has been separated from the Pre-Task phase used by Willis to highlight the importance of preparing learners thoroughly, where necessary rehearsing the task in order to recycle the language and familiarise learners with the context as much as possible. If the previous stage involved brainstorming words connected with the topic, this stage could involve learners in a discussion of their attitudes to it, and preparing their arguments for a debate, or their ideas for a leaflet to draw peoples' attention to the issue

Learners prepare own input for tasks  
e.g.

- planning a report
- practising role-play
- writing a questionnaire to be administered
- thinking of issues in a debate
- brainstorming necessary language
- activating language: eliciting and providing the necessary language



PRE-TASK

TASK  
PREPARATION

TASK  
REALISATION

POST-TASK



## TASK REALISATION

The two previous stages will have been leading up to this stage by fully preparing learners both ideologically and linguistically for the task. This part of the task cycle will mirror as closely as possible an authentic undertaking which participants in European youth work will have to carry out. Whether the task is performed, displayed, recorded, conducted as a group, or carried out in small groups the focus will be on successful realisation of the task.

Learners produce/perform/present their tasks  
e.g.:

- Producing a poster
- Performing a role-play
- Having a debate
- Producing a leaflet
- Giving a presentation



PRE-TASK

TASK  
PREPARATION

TASK  
REALISATION

POST-TASK



## POST TASK

### Post-Task options

#### Language focus

While the task is being carried out, the facilitator may wish to make notes on the language: could any vocabulary be added? Were there any structures that caused misunderstanding or confusion? Were there any phrases which could have been expressed differently? Could any of the language have been used to better effect e.g. made less abrupt, more persuasive etc.? After the task has been completed, participants may wish to look at the material again to gain a better understanding of the language: to look at structures, difficult/unusual vocabulary etc.

#### Feedback and evaluation

The facilitator may wish to conduct a feedback session to discuss the success of the task and consider suggestions for improving it. Participants may wish to discuss such issues as working together, performing in a group, reactions to the topic, amount of language input, things they enjoyed doing, things they didn't enjoy and so on. Evaluation of the task will provide useful information for facilitators when planning further tasks.

#### Reflection upon task realisation

- Was it useful?
- Was it enjoyable?

#### Language reflection, possible further input

- Further exploitation of material for language
- Error correction
- Reflection by learners

**Peer suggestions:** *'could you explain...?' 'could you repeat...?'*

PRE-TASK

TASK  
PREPARATION

TASK  
REALISATION

POST-TASK





### 2.2.4 Language ability and learning styles

When asked to use 'all the language they can muster to express themselves' (Willis 1996), participants who are unfamiliar with this learning context may not feel comfortable or productive in this learning environment. This is not to say that it should be rejected if this is the case, but that facilitators must be aware that they may need to allow time for adjustment, encouragement and confidence building. Some participants may feel they are being thrown in at the deep end and may find they are unable to swim, especially if they are working with people much more confident than themselves. The psychological dynamics of the group will have a great influence on the success of working groups in this respect. If a hesitant participant is working with a supportive group he/she will gain considerable experience even if he/she is not ready to fulfil his/her potential to the full. As was stated in the introduction, (Section 1.2) these approaches require adventurous learners, prepared to take risks, so a spirit of adventure must be fostered by facilitators.



In cases where the participants' language level does not enable them to carry out the task preparation, adaptations will have to be made where more language is fed in as the situation demands. In keeping with the ethos of these approaches to language learning, however, it must be remembered that the language input should be related to the task. A functional approach to language learning would ensure that the learners are aware of the contextual use of the language and that they are going to use it for real-world situations. It is essential that materials developed on a task-based framework should include variations to meet the needs of beginner and lower level learners.

The TBLL approach can be adapted to suit beginner level language learners as long as facilitators are aware of learners' needs and able to adapt. The language input during the pre-task and task preparation stages will have to be suitably adapted. At this level, there may be more call from the participants for *stop and explain* sessions with further examples of the language structures being used. The focus, however, remains the same: the overall aim is on the accomplishment of a real-life task and real-life activities leading to this.

## 2.3 Factors to consider

When using TBLL approaches many different factors have to be taken into consideration and some of these are explored below.

### 2.3.1 Learners' profile

If you are preparing materials before your group arrives, it is advisable to draw up a likely profile of the group. Even if the profile is not exact it will be a framework to start from. It is helpful to aim your materials at a defined group and fine tune later as necessary. You will rarely be faced with a homogeneous group even if the participants are of the same nationality.

Although participants will all be involved in European youth work and may have similar concerns and interests, their learning backgrounds are likely to have been very different. It is important to be aware that there may well be as many different learning backgrounds as there are participants. Each person will come with their own experiences, feelings and attitudes, which are likely to surface during a course. Some participants may not be willing or used to discussing issues. People may have come from a learning environment which is very didactic where they are not asked to provide the information, but to absorb it. They may not be used to giving a controversial opinion or exercising self-expression in a mixed group. An appropriate course of action will need to be negotiated if a task specifically requiring a certain method is to succeed. Participants may not want to practise their language with other participants, having been used to giving answers only to a teacher. Some learners may expect



the facilitator to provide all the answers and may be unused to interacting with other participants during language lessons.

A key element in any language course is a strong learning to learn component. This could include discussions and even demonstrations of different learning styles and explanations of the methods. This is important in the development of participants' learning strategies and, if employed near the beginning of a course, can ease the way for the introduction of new methodologies such as task-based learning.

Some factors for facilitators to consider: participants' ages and any special requirements; their roles in European youth work; their reason for learning the language; various social realities; how participants are used to learning; their previous language learning experiences; ways of encouraging participants to be confident and adventurous learners. (See 1.2 Roles of learners and facilitators).

### **2.3.2 Negotiating course content**

An over-riding influence in choosing your tasks will be the wishes of the participants. There is little point in pursuing a course of action if participants are unwilling to carry it out. They may each have a different agenda: this will need to be managed and negotiated as a group. If participants are asked about their expectations, requirements and wishes, a course can be negotiated which can address most plausible requirements of the participants. In the choice of methodology, it must be remembered that an unfamiliar methodology cannot be foisted upon a group without negotiation. Facilitators may need to adapt decisions and methodologies according to the wishes of the group and in response to on-going evaluation during a course. If however, the facilitator feels it necessary to introduce the participants to a new methodology, this will have to be discussed with them. Participants are sometimes surprised, however, at how much they *enjoy* methods which were previously unfamiliar to them.

### **2.3.3 Location of course and resources available**

The location of the course will inevitably affect the availability and choice of tasks and materials. The following points need to be considered: will materials to support activities and

tasks be freely available? If not, what can you do in advance to obtain suitable material? Will you have to adapt or change planned tasks in this location? Will participants contribute materials? How can you manage with minimal materials? How can you use other resources as well as language-based materials? (See Section 4 Selecting and using materials.)

You may be in a situation where you and the participants are the only resources available: this might seem a daunting challenge, but is a stimulating call for your resourcefulness! In case you find yourself in such a situation, we have provided an example to inspire you! If there are few conventional teaching materials available, look within and around you, draw on the experiences/feelings/observations... etc of the participants. Once your task has been decided upon, the materials can be created from what is available: people, geography, buildings and so on. (See Section 3.1 Tasks from No Materials).

### **2.3.4 The intercultural dimension**

When considering suggestions for language course activities and materials, the desire to increase participants' cultural awareness is paramount. Rather than provide a platform to expound the glories of high culture, it is hoped that by learning the language, participants will also be encouraged to consider aspects of daily living which may be different to what they are familiar with. In this way, it is hoped to provoke participants' self-awareness and awareness of others, and to examine certain cultural aspects which may have been taken for granted. Activities and tasks should attempt to challenge pre-conceived stereotypes and stimulate enquiry, which it is hoped will lead to better mutual understanding.

The cultural and linguistic make-up of the group will also need to be considered. If it is a mono-cultural group in the target language country, will the intercultural dimension be just two way between the host country and country of origin? Will there be a micro-intercultural dimension between one nationality which is seemingly homogenous? This can be a very rewarding exercise in self-awareness among participants, especially in breaking down stereotypes: even within a mono-national group, people can be asked to consider different experiences, lifestyles or social realities





and beliefs. Participants will be encouraged to see themselves and those around them as individuals with their own values and beliefs. Intercultural understanding can be very enriching when bonds are formed through beliefs and attitudes rather than only national boundaries. If it is a multi-cultural group, there may be one nationality which is conspicuously larger than others; will this have any bearing on activities and group dynamics? Might some participants feel excluded if they are not part of the dominant language sub-group? (Consideration of this may need to be given when organising sub-groups.) Will participants themselves decide who they form sub-groups with, or will the facilitator form the groups with an intercultural balance? Facilitators may also need to consider any tensions which may already exist or arise between nationalities and to be aware of possible sensitivities.

The material you find may not seem to have an intercultural perspective to it, yet you may be able to create intercultural tasks from it. Often, something very specific to a certain environment can lead very well into comparisons and reflections about the differences in

experiences. For example even an article about something as seemingly banal as dog-walking may lead to reflections on animals: the way people treat them, people's attitudes to them, vivisection, animal rights groups, working animals and so on. An article was recently used about a strand of Bill Clinton's hair which was auctioned for almost £500! As you can imagine, the reflections upon this can take many paths. Even shopping receipts picked up off the floor can lead to tasks on shopping habits/food consumption/consumerism. Observing the way different countries organise addresses can also lead to interesting comparisons of people's views of housing and civic matters.

This Section ends with a concrete example of a worked through task. The task is preparing and eating a meal together. The only materials are the participants, facilitator and course locality. This means it is a task from no materials. (See also 3.1 Task from No Materials.) At each stage of the framework there are step-by-step guidelines indicating what to do and how to do it. Successful realisation of this task should be a most enjoyable experience!





## 2.4 Concrete example of a task



**Context:** with a multicultural group you decide to prepare a meal and to use this activity to learn the language.

**TASK:** preparing a meal

### PRE-TASK

#### What to do

Discuss :

- Possible menus/dishes
- Food likes/dislikes
- Available budget
- Available ingredients
- Available utensils
- .....



#### How to do it

Explain specialities from different countries ; gather promotional material from different stores ; study special offers ; examine available budget ; check available ingredients, utensils, etc ; put together a menu. Important language points: vocabulary of cooking and food, numbers, etc ...

### TASK PREPARATION

#### What to do

- Select the menu to be prepared
- Divide it into stages
- Find out what each person is able to do
- Decide each person's responsibility
- Collect money
- Go shopping



#### How to do it

Express likes and dislikes ; decide who is to do what ; decide where to shop ; go shopping ; make a list of things to be bought with their prices ; check receipts ; ... Important language points: making comparisons, negotiating, decision-making, communication activities (buying things, asking for information, prices, etc).



## TASK REALISATION

### What to do

- Cook the meal
- Set and decorate the table
- Resolve any disputes
- Eat and chat
- Wash up

### How to do it

Decide where everyone is to sit ; settle any disputes ; talk about individual preferences, the role of women and men, eating habits in different countries, etc ; write out menus ; Important language points : negotiating, conversation gambits, giving commands, requesting things, prepositions of place etc.



## POST-TASK

### What to do

- Comment on and discuss the meal and its preparation, human relationships, any disputes that may have arisen
- Exchange recipes, etc
- Write a letter to a friend describing the evening, etc
- Invent a new (intercultural ?) recipe
- .....

### How to do it

Share views, feelings and sensations ; organise a debate on different food habits (vegetarian/non-vegetarian) ; put together an international menu ; write an account in the past tense ; etc ...

Important language points : expressing the past, expressing subtleties, agreeing and disagreeing, etc.

