

Task-Based Learning

A traditional model for the organisation of language lessons, both in the classroom and in course-books, has long been the PPP approach (presentation, practice, production). With this model individual language items (for example, the past continuous) are presented by the teacher, then practiced in the form of spoken and written exercises (often pattern drills), and then used by the learners in less controlled speaking or writing activities. Although the grammar point presented at the beginning of this procedure may well fit neatly into a grammatical syllabus, a frequent criticism of this approach is the apparent arbitrariness of the selected grammar point, which may or may not meet the linguistic needs of the learners, and the fact that the production stage is often based on a rather inauthentic emphasis on the chosen structure.

An alternative to the PPP model is the Test-Teach-Test approach (TTT), in which the production stage comes first and the learners are "thrown in at the deep end" and required to perform a particular task (a role play, for example). This is followed by the teacher dealing with some of the grammatical or lexical problems that arose in the first stage and the learners then being required either to perform the initial task again or to perform a similar task. The language presented in the 'teach' stage can be predicted if the initial production task is carefully chosen but there is a danger of randomness in this model.

Jane Willis (1996), in her book 'A Framework for Task-Based Learning', outlines a third model for organizing lessons. While this is not a radical departure from TTT, it does present a model that is based on sound theoretical foundations and one which takes account of the need for authentic communication. Task-based learning (TBL) is typically based on three stages. The first of these is the pre-task stage, during which the teacher introduces and defines the topic and the learners engage in activities that either help them to recall words and phrases that will be useful during the performance of the main task or to learn new words and phrases that are essential to the task. This stage is followed by what Willis calls the "task cycle". Here the learners perform the task (typically a reading or listening exercise or a problem-solving exercise) in pairs or small groups. They then prepare a report for the whole class on how they did the task and what conclusions they reached. Finally, they present their findings to the class in spoken or written form. The final stage is the language focus stage, during which specific language features from the task are highlighted and worked on. Feedback on the learners' performance at the reporting stage may also be appropriate at this point.

The main advantages of TBL are that language is used for a genuine purpose meaning that real communication should take place, and that at the stage where the learners are preparing their report for the whole class, they are forced to consider language form in general rather than concentrating on a single form (as in the PPP model). Whereas the aim of the PPP model is to lead from accuracy to fluency, the aim of TBL is to integrate all four skills and to move from fluency to accuracy plus fluency. The range of tasks available (reading texts, listening texts, problem-solving, role-plays, questionnaires, etc) offers a great deal of flexibility in this model and should lead to more motivating activities for the learners.

Learners who are used to a more traditional approach based on a grammatical syllabus may find it difficult to come to terms with the apparent randomness of TBL, but if TBL is integrated with a systematic approach to grammar and lexis, the outcome can be a comprehensive, all-round approach that can be adapted to meet the needs of all learners.