

Learning by doing – Getting some hands-on experience on realizing the principles of task-based learning in designing a learning module in English

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Task-based learning is a big label that nearly all teachers of primary schools in Hong Kong are familiar with. One of the reasons could be that it is an approach recommended in the English Language Curriculum Guide for Primary 1-6 (Curriculum Development Council, 2004) in implementing the English Language curriculum framework. Tasks are described as '*purposeful and contextualized activities in which learners draw together a range of elements in their framework of knowledge and skills to fulfill the task set.*' It further explicates the concept of a 'good learning task' to include the following qualities:

- have a purpose to use English
- have a context for the use of English
- learners need to use the knowledge and skills learnt
- a product is produced in the end

Task-based learning at a glance

Here, Nunan (2004) gave us a more elaborated concept of a task framework. He pointed out that most of the tasks carried out in classrooms belonged to pedagogical tasks, which are '*piece(s) of classroom work that involve learners in comprehending, manipulating producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form.* (p.4)' His definition echoes strongly with the rationales lying behind the primary English curriculum in Hong Kong. In the first place, English is learnt mainly to communicate. Therefore, tasks need to be designed to lay a context and a purpose for communication. The second important message



is the position of grammar in task-based learning. Grammar is learnt for the purpose of conveying meaning. In other words, grammar is learnt not solely for its form but for its use and application. The ultimate purpose is for communication in both spoken and written form of English.

These tasks work effectively in facilitating learning when they are organized in good order. This is why Nunan (2004) emphasized very much the importance of arranging the tasks into a task-based learning framework or in his words, curriculum. In the old days, there was a strong belief that English and all other languages needed to be learnt step by step. Here, the step-by-step learning fashion refers to something resembling very much to mastery learning, which Wilkins (1976) termed it as a 'synthetic' approach to learning. In such an approach, learners are taught the language part by part separately until the whole structure of language is built up. However, in real second language learning situations, learners do not master one item perfectly before they proceed on to learn the next part. Instead, second language learners are always learning several if not numerous items 'imperfectly' and often 'simultaneously'. As what Ellis (1994) has stated, second language learning is 'unstable' in the sense that an item seems to have been 'learnt' at one point in time but seems to be 'unlearnt' at the other.

Learning by doing – putting the principles of TBLT into the making of a module

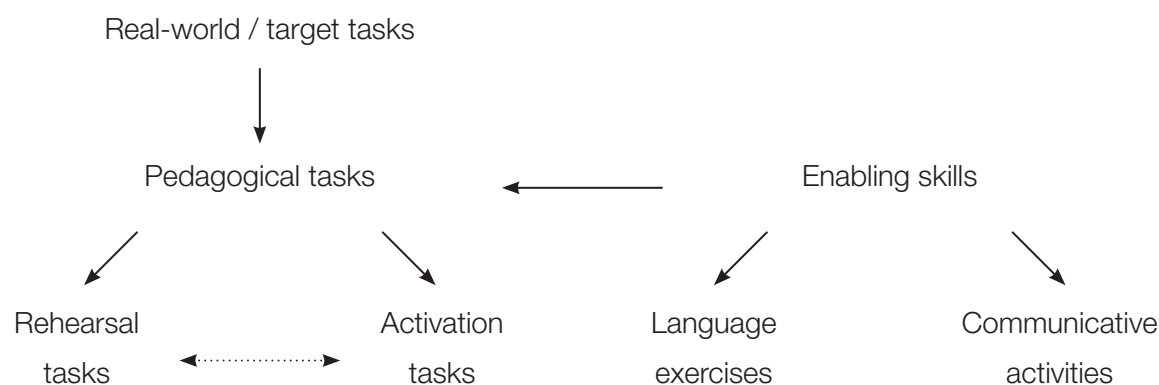
Thanks to findings of researchers like Nunan, Ellis and Wilkins, we worked with schools to infuse the principles of task-based learning into planning learning modules and implementing them in the English classroom. Therefore, five teachers from four schools are invited to share with you their experiences in designing these modules. The sharing session is composed of two parts.

The first part of the sharing session will be devoted to refreshing ourselves on the concepts of task-based learning and showing how the aforementioned concepts of a task are realized into the design of learning tasks. We will show you a variety of pedagogical tasks that have been used in classrooms. Some of the tasks contain a rehearsal rationale while the others have the activation rationale. The former points to tasks in which students are rehearsing 'something they're (students are) going to need to do outside the classroom' in the 'security of the classroom' (Nunan, 2004). For instance, a simulated interview task enables P.6 students to rehearse for the real secondary school interview. Tasks with an activation rationale are those tasks needing no rehearsal but allowing students to solve a problem, role play in an improvised situation, or exchange information using the language knowledge and skills learnt. A classic example is to decide on the programme of the Christmas party.



Most English teachers like us have experienced the unstable and imperfect situations mentioned in the previous section when helping our students to learn. Thus, in our presentation, we will share with you how we build a relatively stable Task-based Language Teaching framework (*see the diagram below*) out of these unstable and imperfect situations. We will show you examples of module plans based on textbooks and the principles of a task-based curriculum. The plans are annotated with the principles and rationales we adopted from task-based learning.

A Framework for TBLT (Nunan, 2004)



This year, we do not stop at merely 'showing' how the curriculum plans are built. Hence, in the second part of the sharing session, participants are invited to have a taste in building module plans with our facilitators. They are English teachers who have a lot of experience in putting the principles of task-based learning into their teaching plans. We all agree with Malcolm Knowles (1980), who was once considered the founding father of adult learning, that adults are more self-directed and internally motivated to learn and have a repertoire of experience. Adults learn better through collaboration. Collins (1991) also analogized adult learning as an interactive relationship of theory and practice. He found that adult learners tended to put theories into practice once an opportunity was presented. With these in mind, we will invite you to collaborate with our facilitators and other participants to work out curriculum plans, which can be used in your own schools. To enable a smooth running of our work, you will be invited to join the following groups working on different levels on different topics.

- Group 1 – Family and friends (KS1)
- Group 2 – Animals and pets (KS1)
- Group 3 – Food and Healthy diet (KS2)
- Group 4 – Travelling around Hong Kong (KS2)
- Group 5 – Films and stories (KS2)



We will adopt an integrated approach to scaffold listening, reading, speaking and writing tasks into a module. The product we generated will be shared and a refined plan together with materials will be compiled and sent to all participants sometime after the sharing session.

References

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