

# 39 TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES

A VERY PRACTICAL GUIDE TO USING TBL IN THE  
ESL/EFL CLASSROOM



**JACKIE BOLEN**

**39 Task-Based Language Teaching and Learning  
Activities: A Very Practical Guide to Using TBL in  
the ESL/EFL Classroom**

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[www.eslactivity.org](http://www.eslactivity.org)

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# About the Author: Jackie Bolen

I taught English in South Korea for 10 years to every level and type of student. I've taught every age from kindergarten kids to adults. Most of my time centered around teaching at two universities: five years at a science and engineering school in Cheonan, and four years at a major university in Busan where I taught upper-level classes for students majoring in English. I now live in Vancouver, Canada where I teach academic writing, business English and am an examiner for a popular language proficiency test.

In case you were wondering what my academic qualifications are, I hold a Master of Arts in Psychology. During my time in Korea, I completed both the Cambridge CELTA and DELTA certification programs. With the combination of fifteen years teaching ESL/EFL to learners of all ages and levels, and the more formal teaching qualifications I've obtained, I have a solid foundation on which to offer advice to English teachers.

I truly hope that you find this book useful. I would love it if you sent me an email with any questions or feedback that you might have.

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# **An Introduction to Task-Based Teaching and Learning**

Task-based language (TBL) learning is kind of all the rage these days as part of the overall Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach. The focus is on having students being competent communicators as opposed to some of the older models like Grammar-Translation or the Audio-Lingual method where the focus is on mastering specific grammatical constructions or a certain set of vocabulary.

Here's a more formal definition:

Task-based learning (also known as TBL) is a TESOL approach that has a base in Communicative Language Teaching. Teaching and learning happen through a variety of communicative tasks that involve lots of teamwork among students. Well-designed tasks within this approach should elicit the target grammar and vocabulary naturally.

TBL can serve as a nice change of pace from the usual Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) style of lesson or the Test-Teach-Test (TTT) approach where the focus is again on mastering a certain vocabulary set or grammatical construction. Instead, students are free to use whatever language they'd like in order to accomplish the required task. This can help increase motivation as there is more freedom for students to learn what they want to learn.

# What are the Advantages of Task-Based Learning Over PPP?

Many EFL/ESL textbooks and teachers generally follow the PPP model (Presentation-Practice-Production). However, task-based learning has some advantages over this traditional model, including the following:

- Students control the language they learn and produce, rather than being restricted to something pre-selected by the teacher or textbook.
- Task-based learning allows for a natural setting of the context where students can base learning on their experiences. This makes learning more personal and relevant to students in many cases.
- TBL can expose students to many more varied uses of English than PPP can. Think ESL collocations, lexical phrases and patterns—the sky is the limit!
- Language learning can arise from student need, instead of what the next unit is in the textbook. This makes it more memorable for learners and can also serve to be a better use of class time. Don't waste time teaching things that students have already mastered just because it's the next unit up in the textbook.
- It makes an ideal choice for larger classes where students may not get enough practice time with a more traditional teacher-centred classroom.
- Students are generally very motivated to complete the tasks because it's something they've chosen to do (at least to some degree) and is hopefully relevant to them.
- In comparison to PPP, TBL is more student-centred and communicative. Anything we can do to increase student talking time, the better.
- Errors are a natural part of the learning process in TBL and are seen as a learning opportunity. In PPP, it's something a bit more negative in that it's a

variation from the "correct" form the students were taught.

# **5 Reasons to Consider Task-Based Language Learning**

There are many reasons why you might consider incorporating some task-based activities into your English classes. However, here are some of my favourites.

## **#1: A Why**

I love task-based activities because they give students a reason learn—as opposed to just using the language in a meaningless kind of way such as in a “repeat after me” activity. For example, students have to complete something, such as a presentation or some research about a country of their choice, including money and currency, and then make a poster.

## **#2: Learn What you Want to Learn**

The second reason I like task-based activities is that they give students a chance to explore the specific language they want to know. Instead of the teacher always telling them what grammar and vocabulary they need to learn, students discover what they need to know during the process, figure it out (with some help from the teacher sometimes), use it and then often remember it for the long-term because it was something they sought out for themselves.

## **#3: Task-Based Learning ESL Activities are Student-Centred**

I'm ALL about student-centred language teaching. After all, students should be doing the hard work, not me! One of the main benefits of the task-based approach is that students are engaged and working on something the entire time. The teacher talking time (TTT) to student talking time (STT) ratio is often higher in traditional teaching and learning environments than in TBL, where students' speak a lot more in English.

The role of the teacher is to set up the activity, offer some guidance and feedback but that's about it. This results in students speaking English without any motivation or classroom management issues.

## **#4: Learn How to Work in Groups with Task-Based Learning Activities**

I know that many students (and myself too!) often don't like working in groups. However, this is a real-life skill that our students can work on in our classes. Group learning dynamics facilitate many different learning skills as well as real world practical skills: initiating questions, problem solving, brainstorming, creativity, turn taking, etc. I try to set up the tasks and offer guidance throughout so that students have a good experience with them.



## **#5: All About Meaning**

Many textbooks and ESL activities focus on forms and while they do touch on real-life communication, it often feels kind of artificial. It's nice to use task-based language teaching activities to get away from this once in a while.

For example, the tasks in this book focus on meaning and communication and far less on the exact right vocabulary word or grammatical phrase. It's fun for students to try out their language skills in activities like these.

# Disadvantages of Task-Based Teaching

There are a few disadvantages to this style of teaching and learning to keep in mind. Here are a few of the main ones.

- Lesson planning can take longer than with something like a PPP approach. Investing time, however, is usually only when first preparing a TBL lesson—afterwards, it gets easier and faster. After a TBL lesson has been taught several times there is less planning time involved, and more rewards for the teacher and students.
- Course books usually aren't designed for this style of teaching and it can take a lot of time to adapt them to this. Many teachers choose to design task-based lesson plans from scratch instead of trying to adapt something to fit.
- If students have very little in the way of the required language to complete the activity, then it can turn into a more traditional kind of lesson very easily. But if the teacher knows their students' interests and hobbies, choosing the right task can help reduce this issue as students will be highly motivated.
- You may encounter unmotivated students who are reluctant to try out a new learning style in a language class. This is when demonstrating the task and providing a model are vital.
- The potential for a “bad” lesson is higher with TBL than with traditional methods. Talking to other teachers about their experiences with the same or similar lessons is a good way to manage this issue.
- Some students may not enjoy group work, especially if there is a wide range of motivation levels within a single class. If this is the case, try to mix motivated students into each group so that there are leaders to help keep things on track.

# **Problems Teachers Might Encounter in a TBL Activity**

There are some problems teachers might encounter during a task-based lesson plan. These are usually avoided through careful planning though so it's certainly worth spending some time on this.

# **#1: Tasks aren't Well Designed**

The biggest problem with TBL is that tasks aren't well-designed. They need to have enough of a challenge to them that students have to work a little bit hard to figure them out and complete them. However, they also shouldn't be too difficult so that students feel like giving up. Aim for the middle ground here between the two extremes and you'll do well.

One of the best ways to avoid bringing a poorly designed TBL lesson for the first time into the classroom is to do the task yourself. Take note of problems that you run into, time management for micro-tasks that run faster or longer than you think (and adjust accordingly for students' language levels). The added bonus of doing the task also includes a ready-made model for students to see. This may require taking pictures or short video clips of each stage during the task. Ultimately, doing these preparation steps will help reduce the chances of a TBL lesson running into problems.