

Utilizing Task-Types to Guide Lesson Planning

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Introduction

After deciding on the objectives for a lesson, I am always left with two more questions: How do I present a task to meet the objectives in an engaging way? How do I ensure the tasks help the learners engage in meaningful negotiation of the language? A useful approach that kills these two birds with one stone is thinking in terms of “task types.” The purpose of this article is not to describe all the steps of the task-based process (as there are whole texts that explain this process), but to show how thinking in terms of task-types can stimulate creativity in lesson planning by providing a generative framework; armed with the knowledge of a limited set of task-types, the teacher can generate an almost inexhaustible number of specific activities flowing from them.

What are tasks?

Not everyone agrees with what counts as a task or task-type but here are some guidelines from two leading researchers in the field:

Nunan (2004) defines pedagogical tasks as “a piece of classroom work that involves 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 which the attention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form” (p. 4).

Willis (2018a, ¶ 2) states it concisely as “Task-based teaching is about creating opportunities for meaning-focused language use.”

Examples of Task-Types

Willis (2018b) labels some of these tasks as listing or brainstorming, ordering, and sorting (which can include ranking, sequencing, or classifying), matching, comparing similarities and differences, problem solving, and sharing personal experiences or storytelling.

Other task-types can include reconstruction and another one I have labeled transformation.

Activities Utilizing Task-Types

Let's start with the last one first, transformation:

One idea for using transformations is to have students transform a text into a dialog. For example, students working on understanding the use of passive voice can be given a short newspaper story to analyze. One way to do this would be to start with a dictation exercise (which can also be used as a reconstruction task). After students reconstruct what they heard from the dictation, they can write their reconstructed versions on the board and compare it with other students. Students, with the help of the teacher, can then notice grammatical issues, particularly in this case the fact the passive voice is used. A discussion can ensue about why it is used in this context. The next part of the task is to have students take the story and turn it into a dialog, also transforming some passive voice constructions into active voice constructions.

Another way to use transformations is to turn flat, unillustrated text into a graphic novel format. One quarter, I used a penguin reader novel version of Jane Eyre for a reading task. A task for students was to pick five key scenes, draw them out on a big poster paper, and provide narration as well as dialog.

For storytelling, a favorite activity of mine is to use the skeletal story exercise. For example, the teacher can select out somewhere between five and ten words and phrases from a short non-fiction or fictional story (just a paragraph long – an abridged newspaper story works well here). The teacher can write these on a white board and then have the students work together to create a short story of their own. The students can be given a limit of how long the story should be (ideally, just a paragraph so they can write their versions on the board). This

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is an excellent task in that students are forced to negotiate the details of the story and the language used, as well as argue over their grammatical choices. Stories can then be presented to the whole class for meaning and language analysis, guided by the teacher. Additionally, at the end, students can be presented the original version to compare the similarities and differences with each other.

Another idea I've used for storytelling and reconstruction (which also involves problem solving) is to take a popular folk story or ghost story and replace some of the vocabulary with nonsense words I have made up (usually just about 10 to 12 words). The task for students is to read through the text and try to guess the meaning of the nonsense words (ideally, words that are used more than once in the story, and even better in two different parts of speech – for example as both a verb and a noun). The students can work together, and then with the whole class and the teacher's guidance, retell the story, with the correct words selected (the correct words can be supplied at the bottom of the page). Next up, the teacher can take the story away and students must then reconstruct it, negotiating for language with each other. After that, the teacher can ask students to write up different parts of the story on the board. Additionally, the teacher with the whole class can engage in a language analysis activity. Finally, students can be given the task to make up nonsense words of their own for a common story that their group or pair knows. This can be presented to other students to decipher.

Ranking tasks are very useful in getting students to weigh their values and discuss them with others. One example activity is to select a list of inventions throughout history. The teacher can present these to students and then ask them to narrow down the list to just ten. Next, they can be asked to rank them in order of importance. They will need to be able to argue why some inventions are more important than others. Alternatively, they can rank the least important inventions or their favorite inventions.

Ordering activities can be useful in writing classes as well. The teacher can cut up a paragraph, put the sentences in a baggie, hand these out to students and then ask them to put the sentences in the correct order. Students should first try to

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identity topic sentences and then the sentences that would logically follow based on preceding sentences and signal words used.

A great activity for problem solving is the famous marshmallow challenge. Students, in groups, are given a marshmallow, some dried spaghetti, tape, and some string. The goal is to make the highest tower (that is also stable) with these materials in an allotted time period. This takes a great deal of negotiation. A matching activity I've liked is to take various comic strips, cut out the language, and then have students try to match the dialogues with the comics. Of course, some pre-teaching of language is necessary.

In closing, I like to think of these task types as archetypes of the ESL Teachers' collective unconscious. Thinking in task-types is useful for creating engaging lessons, in that once you understand the variety of task types, it helps in generating a large body of specific tasks for any one category of task.

References

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