

TEACHING AND TESTING

Task-based Language Learning

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Abstract

In this article, Manu Menard looks back to explain why he changed his way of teaching a European language (French) after seven years' teaching and expands on the need for self-reflection in teaching. He goes on to develop his perception of the Task-based approach, looking at a theoretical framework, the kind of tasks possible, and two examples of the approach he uses, finally taking a critical look at the problems he has encountered.

The task-based approach can be motivating and effective in teaching European languages.

I am presently a teacher of French at St Matthew's Collegiate in Masterton and prior to that position, I taught German and French in Rotorua for six years. Last year, after being away from a full-time position for two years, I resumed teaching at St Matthew's Collegiate and that is when I started adopting a new way of teaching: the task-based approach.

Why did I adopt a new way of teaching?

Why? Because my Year 11 students in Rotorua were successful as they scored top grades in both internal and external assessments and there was an element of fun I could instil throughout all the year levels I taught, so I should have been content ... but I wasn't!

First, I was repeatedly shocked to realise how poor my students' conversational and listening skills were when a native speaker would come into our class and interact with them, and second, the odd student would fly off to France or a French-speaking country and come back into my class "gently" remarking that they would like to learn how to speak French "better." What a slap in the face! Who would not take it badly? I did. I am probably of a perfectionist nature but knowing that my students would go overseas and not be able to get by was very disheartening for me as a teacher. I saw it as a failure on my part. Inside I knew I was not doing justice to my job as a language teacher, let alone my students. After all, what is the point of learning a language if you can't engage in a basic conversation with a native speaker?

And there was another point related to my growing dissatisfaction: how come my students would perform well at the NCEA level if they couldn't converse past the simplest routine Year



9 type of answer-question? (You know:How old are you? Have you got brothers and sisters? Bla bla bla ...)? I could not reconcile that. I then started questioning other close colleagues who would give me an honest response on their students' conversational level. A friend admitted that he could not give Excellence to a German-native speaker because she didn't have enough Level 6 structures. He had to ask her to include a few more structures in her conversation part to grant her Excellence after the initial conversation was over. I thought to myself: What the heck is going on here? Here is a native speaker and she cannot even get the highest grade in New Zealand! This is not on!

Anyway, I am not going to get into a debate over the fairness and validity of our assessment system in New Zealand. There are some very good points about it. It is just another issue I do not want to delve into right now. The point I just want to make here is that my frustration as a teacher, unable to develop my students' basic skills along with the realisation that an assessment-driven syllabus that had pervaded my way of teaching, made me unhappy and self-reflective. I had to change my teaching or get out ... and guess what? I got out!

I took a two-year break from teaching for family reasons and that was the best thing that could have ever happened to me. Life is full of twists, isn't it? I then miraculously had plenty of time to self-reflect and analyse how I could do things better the day I would get back into teaching, because let's face it- once you start teaching, it's like a grinding machine (and I'm not even talking about the students! Ha!) and you just don't have the time or energy to self-reflect. Going through the motions of the day is what goes through your mind when you wake up. So self-reflection? Forget it! It's always in the 'later' basket! What a pity though, because it is the essence of our job, I believe. There is a French saying that goes like this: *La plus importante et la plus négligée de toutes les conversations est l'entretien avec soi-même.* Meaning: The most important and neglected conversations of all is the one we have with ourselves.

How far did my self-reflection take me?

Well, several things came into play.

I looked at my own itinerary as a school language learner and there, I found no solace in the way I should change my pedagogy. Tracing back my roots was of no positive use. Like most French students of my generation, grammar was the ultimate goal of our learning and I had consistently failed to excel in French, German and Spanish. I did not learn to speak at school at all. Oh no! The real skills I learnt later on in life were when I was on the spot and I had to survive to understand and make myself understood. From the satisfaction of babbling in another language then came the motivation to find out more about grammar and the progress happened quite quickly from then on.

I also simply reflected on how babies learn their mother tongue. Well, there is no secret here and I don't need to have completed a PhD on the matter. It starts very basically with pointing at the desired object and mumbling utterances, and then one word and then more words, and then sentences get formed as the years go by. But in no way, I could imagine, nor could you, a baby expressing himself: Excuse me, dear mother, I must confess that the porridge you have just offered me is slightly too hot for my sensitive buds! Crikey, witnessing this would be a cracker of a joke!



One day, after checking out the latest writings on the TKI website, I read a paper by Rod Ellis with his ten principles and that was it! I had finally found someone whose methodology met my vague teaching ideals. I then Googled up on the task-based approach and spent countless hours on the net searching for a way of implementing this new approach. I have to tell you at this point that my research was not very often fruitful as it seemed that most

experts dwelled considerably on the theoretical framework of the approach but presented very few concrete activities in exchange until the time I went on Andrew Finch's website. Compared to many other task-based approach advocates, He, with a capital -H-, offered books with hundreds of examples that could be downloaded. What a joy it was for me! At last, someone with practical ideas! Most of his ideas were not new to me but some of them were. So I am grateful to him for inspiring me. I urge you to do the same too.

And then, I read the new curriculum booklet like everyone else and I was pleased to discover that Ellis' principles are right up there and that in the Knowledge strand, it's all about 'negotiated meaning' and in the Communication strand, 'students learn to use the language to make meaning'. The task-based approach fits so well into the new curriculum. Trust me. The task-based approach is trendy. Ha!

What is my perception of the task-based approach?

What I'll say next are not the words of the experts on the topic but my interpretation of the approach. So if there are experts reading my article who disagree with my views, well, I'll possibly agree with them. No offence, my opinion is just one opinion and I respect everyone else's too.

A) First and foremost, the focus is predominantly on the meaning. Fluency comes first, grammar second. In three words, fluency over accuracy. Let the child babble. Let the learner fumble. Let the future linguist mumble. That is what matters. The language is a tool for communication, nothing else, certainly not an object of study per se. I am not a believer of the IRDP technique (Input, Recognition, Discrimination, Practice) simply because of the fact that the teacher imposes what is to be learnt. The task-based approach would propose the PPP technique (Present-Practise-Produce) instead. I will explain that a bit further on.

Here is a metaphor: imagine a child who wants to fly a kite. He will ask an adult- you, the teacher. Imagine you explain all the components of the kite to the child as you would with grammar: Well, do you see, here you've got the rope, and then, here, this is the canopy that is connected to the rope through this frame here, the frame supports the canopy and will enable it to fly in the sky because it is that part that flies in the sky because it is light, so you have to run, hold on the rope, and let it go as you're running, but mind you, if it's already windy, well, you don't have to run because...

Can you imagine the amount of frustration experienced by the child at that stage? He just wants to fly the damn thing, doesn't he? He does not need explanations at that stage. Well, it's the same with teachers who believe that grammar is the pinnacle of language learning. First, they will frustrate the learner and second, he will not remember anything you have said until he has flown it himself. If the kite falls to the ground or flies off unattached or whatever, then he may be receptive to what you have to say. So my recommendation is very poetic- let the child fly away with the kite first!



B) Secondly, I strongly advocate a full-immersion style of teaching and learning. How can a learner learn the target language if he does not have opportunities to be exposed to it? The more exposure, the better. I am aware that I am fortunate to teach a language I am a native speaker of and that makes things easier on me although I could tell you of some stories of my inability to translate what the students wanted to know. Yes, non-native teachers, you are not the only ones to get caught out! Ignorance is not bliss, is it? It happens to me on a regular basis. Let us all be honest and say to the students we will get back to them if we do not know. The Listserv is great for that, or hassle a native speaker you know- he might not know himself anyway (that's me!). But what is of paramount importance is not how much you say but how little you say and the fact you say it repeatedly enough for the students to recognise and use it. As a rule of thumb, I try to speak as little as possible and let them speak as much as possible. Instruction times are mine and they have to listen to them but after the instructions, they have to get the opportunities to express themselves and I become more like a facilitator.

Another rule of thumb for me is that I never translate more than 5 words in a sentence. The students have got to learn not to be able to know all the words that go through their minds and be able to shorten their semantic needs. This is maybe the hardest thing for the students but it gives them great lateral-thinking and problem-solving skills. One more time: no more than 5 words translated and written on the board by the teacher! On the last day of the week, it is quiz time: verbal, written, by pairs, groups, teams, teacher-made, student-made, ... an array of quizzes. Students know it and it enables them to acquire a repertoire of formulaic expressions.

I have discovered that if the students have the choice to speak in French or English in class, very few will choose the French option. So from the Year 10 level up, I do not give them the option anymore. Any conversation must be in French. If they have chosen the option, it should mean that they are keen to learn and therefore, the target language is the only language used in class. It is hard at times but it is ethics, standards, self-discipline, name it whatever you want, they must integrate into their learning. How do I reinforce that? Every time a student uses English, she goes out of the classroom for 5 seconds, comes back in and apologises to me and the whole class in French. In English, it goes: Sorry, Mr Menard and the whole class, because I spoke in English. I promise I will not do it again. Going out, let's say, three times in one lesson, is a pain in the butt, and usually the lesson is quickly learnt by the student. It's all about expectations and consistency. On a positive note, every time a student says something in French, they have the opportunity, if they wish, to use a French stamp on the reward chart

next to their name. When they get 25 stamps, they get a \$2 present from the \$2 shop. My budget a year on \$2 presents is between \$100 and \$150 and the reward chart is very worthwhile, believe me. Remember too that not all students are extrinsically motivated and some students only put a stamp on the reward chart if you tell them to. Some decide not to and that is fine too.

C) In general, the task-based approach is inductive which means the grammar is mostly implicitly taught but on the odd occasion when two or three students don't get the grammatical point in the consciousness-raising task (see the framework for designing a lesson); I will have an explicit focus on form, preferably from the students themselves first.

The corrective feedback is first a recast which means I reformulate the student's sentence minus the error and the student repeats in turn. If the student still makes a mistake on the grammatical point being studied after the consciousness-raising task, I do not recast anymore but I use clarification by saying: Pardon? In other words, I am not happy with the sentence just said and therefore the student must make an effort to say the whole sentence without the mistake.

What is important is not to correct every mistake. I believe we teachers tend to act like vultures or hyenas when it comes down to mistakes made by students, just ready to pounce on any big or tiny mistakes made. I have to watch myself at times too. I could easily tend to be a hyena! To me, correcting the mistake that has just been worked on is what matters or if a student is talking freely and the same mistake is repeated a few times, then I do a recast and next a clarification if the error has not been picked up by the student. Personally, verb tenses and verb endings are the area I particularly recast in when a student is engaged in a free conversation. Verbs are the cornerstone of a sentence. But to recap: only stop the student talking when they haven't mastered the grammatical point just covered or else you could inhibit them!

D) Find out more about the cooperative learning principles:

- positive interdependence: one for all and all for one; they need each other to complete the task
- individual accountability: as a teacher, ensure a random allocation of reporting, equal participation: each has a part to play;
- simultaneous interaction: the person who talks learns,
- evaluation of work

These are of such great added value to the task-based learning. I completely reject the claims that putting kids in groups around a table makes it cooperative learning. There is so much more than that. For more information, read books by Kagan or Don Brown's "Cooperative learning in New Zealand schools." To me, every language teacher in New Zealand should have a copy of this. His principles fit in with the task-based approach like a treat. In my years at Rotorua Lakes High School, I was lucky enough to be involved in a pilot project on cooperative learning and I have gained some very valuable insight into that type of learning which I am making purposeful use of now.

Framework for designing a lesson

I have never been keen on the IRDP technique (Input-Recognition-Discrimination-Practice) because of the mere fact that that technique does not start from the students themselves but

imposes some kind of constructed knowledge on them. The task-based approach, on the other hand, proposes the PPP technique (Present-Practise-Produce).

In a nutshell:

- the students are presented with a task to complete,
- they make mistakes while performing it,
- the teacher selects only one mistake, creates a consciousness-raising task whereby the students analyse and discover the language,
- the task is repeated minus the error.

Little by little, bit by bit, could be the task-based approach's motto. Don't worry about the other errors unless they have already been worked on. Don't become a hyena! Just recast on the other errors.

1) Pre-task

The activity is framed. In other words, the outcome of the task is established. The students are introduced to the topic and task. The instructions are clear either with guided planning time or not. There is a recall of some language or presentation of a model with a similar task. As far as the vocabulary is concerned; the learners brainstorm the words related to the topic or they do a cooperative dictionary search (different words can be allocated to students or not) or the teacher creates a match up exercise with words and their definition or crosswords with definitions,

2) During task

The learners perform the task and make mistakes but the teacher does not stop them yet. There can be a deadline. If there is no time pressure, the fluency gets better. But sometimes, it is good to put pressure on them to complete the task by a deadline and thus give it pace. At that stage of the lesson, the teacher listens and facilitates. He does not intervene, just listens. If a student requires his attention, he gives it but only after the question has been asked to his group first (an old cooperative learning reflex). The teacher makes a mental or written note of a common mistake that most students are making. Depending on the task, the teacher usually has an idea of the kind of mistake the students are going to make and he is prepared for the next step. Sometimes, as in a free talk, there is no preconceived idea of what to expect and a pattern of mistakes will emerge from the students' talk.

3) Post-task

The students report on their task and evaluate it, their individual work, and group work, what went well, what went wrong, how to improve their performance next time (there are several evaluation forms possible). Not only they do that (don't panic, they don't evaluate every single time!), but the teacher also presents to them a consciousness-raising task whereby they have to analyse the language and discover a mistake they have been making all along. I quite like the view of grammar being discovered rather than inflicted. Consciousness-raising tasks can be repetition, substitution, gapped sentences, dictation, transcript from students, competitive activities. Once the grammatical point has been noticed by the students, the task is repeated and the students are expected to improve their new grammatical competence. If they don't,

I'm around to clarify (Pardon?) and they are encouraged to clarify for each other too.

What kind of tasks?

- Ordering and sorting (sequencing, categorising, ranking, classifying): eg. a set of information to order and sort to specific criteria.
- Listing (brainstorming, fact-finding): eg. complete list or draft mindmap.
- Comparing (matching, finding similarities and differences).
- Problem-solving (analysing real situations, hypothetical ones, reasoning, decision-making).
- Sharing personal experiences (narrating, describing, exploring and explaining attitudes, opinions, reactions).
- Creative tasks (brainstorming, fact-finding, ordering and sorting, comparing, problem-solving and others): end product.

Example of a task at the Year 9 French level: Mon ami imaginaire

The goal is for the students to be able to listen to someone else's imaginary friend, 'adopt' that new friend, and report that new friend to someone else and repeat that each time. The activity combines various Achievement Objectives but all in all, it's about giving personal details. Writing, listening and speaking skills are involved. I do this activity after having studied the points covered. So it's a revision exercise but there's nothing stopping you from doing it as a start to teaching these points.

First, I write on the board as follows:

- Je te présente mon amie imaginaire
- Elle s'appelle Carmen (her name is Carmen).
- Elle va très bien (she is very well).
- Elle a dix-neuf ans (she is 19).
- Elle vient d'Espagne (she comes from Spain).
- Son anniversaire, c'est le 3 avril (her birthday is on the third of April).

Secondly, I ask the students to write their own imaginary friend in their exercise book. The only things they have to change are the underlined bits. They have 5 minutes max. I am not available for translation for once and I say it right from the start.

Thirdly, I ask for a volunteer and I ask her to read out her imaginary friend to me. I take notes. I show I take notes to the other students. I also read out my imaginary friend to her and I ask her, with plenty of gestures, to take notes of my imaginary friend too. I thank her. She sits down.

Then, I ask another volunteer to come up and this time, I read out the imaginary friend that I've just heard from the first volunteer. At that stage, most students exclaim that they've got it! If not, they explain to each other in French what the activity is leading up to! I tell them they have 10 minutes to hear and repeat each other's imaginary friend and then I'll stop them. Remember all the instructions from the teacher are in French. There's no cheating here!

While they are exchanging their imaginary friend, I circulate around to hear a pattern of mistakes. Remember, you only select one mistake. I personally target: from + a country (du/de/d'/des: four options in French) but you can decide to target another grammatical point. Up to you.

While they are talking, I write on the board their mistakes and underline their word for from in French:

eg: elle vient d'Etats-Unis, de Canada, de Italie ...

I also write the correct version with a + above the word "from"

Correct version: elle vient ⁺des Etats-Unis, ⁺du Canada, ⁺d'Italie

I get the students to sit down and ask them to discover why from is different in French. There are always switched on students who will provide the explanation and if not, remind them of the ever-permanent masculine, feminine, plural, word starting with a vowel pattern. Students go to the board and write: masculine country, feminine country, country starting with a vowel and plural country underneath the appropriate word for from.

At that stage, the students remember it (or if you haven't done that grammatical point before, they learn the new point) and I organise five gapped sentences, the gap being the word from.

The exercise is corrected. I ask the students to correct their new imaginary friend and the word from if there is a mistake and they repeat the task and swap imaginary friends for another ten minutes.

Remind students they are not allowed to show each other their imaginary friend in the exercise book and that whatever happens, the interaction must be in French. For example, if they don't understand the name of the imaginary friend, they ask: ça s'épelle comment? (How is it spelt?)

It takes training and time to evaluate in French for the students but after four or five evaluations, they start getting the relevant vocabulary and believe me, it is so worth it, their work gets so much better. Anyway, that's another issue but I am big on evaluations.

- 1) Qu'est-ce que tu as révisé personnellement? (What have you revised personally?)
- 2) Ça t'a plu? Pourquoi? (Did you like it? Why?)
- 3) Si ça ne t'a pas plu, qu'est-ce qui ne t'a pas plu? (If you didn't like it, what didn't you like?)

Example of a task at the Year 10 French level : Qu'est-ce que tu en penses?

I give the following sheet to the my students and basically, it's a survey type of questionnaire on giving your opinion but the big difference with other non-task-based surveys is that this one starts from the student's input and there's a wrap-up.

Qu'est-ce que tu en penses? (What do you think about it?)

- 1) Ecris tes propres mots dans le questionnaire. (Write your own words in the questionnaire).
- 2) Demande à ta partenaire son opinion. Mets une croix ☒ (Ask your partner her opinion and put a cross).
- 3) Demande à une autre personne. Coche ☑ (ask another person and put a tick).
- 4) Demande à d'autres gens. Invente des symboles (Ask other people and make up symbols).

- 1= Oui, je suis d'accord (Yes, I agree)
- 2= Oui, peut-être (Yes, maybe)
- 3= Je ne sais pas (I don't know)
- 4= Non, peut-être pas (No, maybe not)
- 5= Non, je ne suis pas d'accord (No, I disagree)

« A mon avis » (In my opinion)	1	2	3	4	5
..... est plus passionnant (e) que/qu' (is more exciting than)	1	2	3	4	5
..... est plus populaire que/qu'..... (is more popular than)	1	2	3	4	5
..... est plus fort (e) que/qu'..... (is stronger/spicier than)	1	2	3	4	5
..... est plus délicieux (euse) que/qu'..... (is tastier than)	1	2	3	4	5
..... est mieux/meilleur (e) que/qu' (is better than)	1	2	3	4	5
..... est plus talentueux (euse) que/qu'..... (is more talented than)	1	2	3	4	5
..... est meilleur (e) pour la santé que/qu'..... (is healthier than)	1	2	3	4	5
..... est moins intéressant (e) que/qu'..... (is less interesting than)	1	2	3	4	5
..... est moins important (e) que/qu'..... (is less important than)	1	2	3	4	5
..... est moins amusant (e) que/qu'..... (is less funny than)	1	2	3	4	5
..... est aussi utile que/qu'..... (is as useful as)	1	2	3	4	5
..... est aussi bon (bonne) que/qu'..... (is as good as)					

La plupart des gens pensent que/qu' (most people think that)

.....

Certains pensent que/qu' (Some think that)

.....

Quelques-unes pensent que/qu' (A few think that)

.....

Personne ne pense que/qu' (No one thinks that)

.....

My students know most of the vocabulary presented in the table but I also write down on the board the words they don't know and then I assign one or two words per student and they search the meaning of the unknown words in the dictionary and then we pull our knowledge together and I write the translation on the board and at the end of the task, they copy the vocab down into their vocabulary books.

To fill in the gaps in the table, students ask me the vocabulary and I write on the board as follows for all students to see:

eg: poivre (m.) (pepper), sciences (f.pl.), ...

My students know the meaning of the abbreviations in brackets and so should your students too (m: masculine, f: feminine, pl: plural.)

The vocab at the bottom of the table is just stuff for students to use when they are interacting with each other. If they don't use it, it's OK but they have to respond appropriately when they are asked.

Before the students start filling in the gaps, I ask them to use a pencil ... au cas où (just in case!) and then they fill in the table and then they start asking their classmates and I let them get on with it.

Maybe 30 minutes later, and I know it beforehand (they usually miss out on using an article in front of the noun in French), I stop them and I write down their mistakes on the board. I use an question mark (?) in front each noun that they forgot to use an article in front of. They have to tell me why the interrogation mark is there and they usually know the answer. All in French remember!

I then insist on the new grammatical point and I point at the vocabulary they asked me and that I wrote on the board and they orally give me the answer: eg: poivre? Le poivre! Sciences? Les sciences! And so on ...

And then I let them resume their conversation but prior to that they have to make changes on their nouns using a pen this time if they don't have an article in front of them.

Finally, they wrap up the task with conclusions in French using the last lines of the table (most people think that, etc ...) and I get them to complete a short evaluation:

- 1) Tu te souviens de quel vocabulaire? (What vocabulary can you remember?)
- 2) Qu'est-ce que tu as trouvé difficile? Pourquoi? (What did you find hard? Why?)
- 3) Qu'est-ce que tu as trouvé facile? Pourquoi? (What did you find easy? Why?)
- 4) Qu'est-ce que tu vas essayer de ne pas oublier la prochaine fois? (What will you try not to forget next time?)
- 5) Est-ce qu'il y a d'autres articles que tu connais? Lesquels? (Are there any other articles you know of? Which ones?)
- 6) Qu'est-ce qui te surprend dans tes conclusions? (What comes as surprise in your conclusions?)

This task usually takes 2 periods.

The problems I have encountered

- A) First, it requires a lot of energy on behalf of the teacher especially at the junior level when they don't know anything. This year, I'm adopting a task-based approach with my Years 10

and 11 and I'm gradually introducing it at Year 9 Level. As I was not very well in terms 1 and 2, I did not have the energy to do it then.

B) Second, it is hard to implement it at the Year 9 level with 25 students when half of them are uninterested in learning a language anyway. The motivational factor is a hard one to combat. So my way around it is to mix it up with games. I think that is the only way at that level when they haven't decided on their option for the next year yet.

C) Funnily enough, I have two students from my Year 11 class (my guinea-pigs last year at the Year 10 level) who asked me midway through term 2 if we could do less talking and work more on structures. That request took me by surprise and came directly after a writing exam where no-one got an Excellence. I think, when they get to NCEA level 1, the students are not as interested in speaking as in getting top grades. That request might also be a symbol of a competitive school. That request



also reflected the fact that despite doing quite a fair amount of writing, the task-based approach does favour the listening and speaking skills. On that, I have never had such fantastic grades in speaking, listening and reading comprehension skills as this year. That is also a consequence of the task-based approach. So what have I done lately? Well, I have made sure that they would gain more grammatical structures in their writing. Easy fix.

Is the task-based approach effective or not? Motivating or not?

A) I have never heard students speaking so well in my classes. What I mean is that they still make a truckload of mistakes but the spontaneity and fluency of my students has radically improved compared to my students a few years ago.

B) The comments from other language teachers and native speakers are very encouraging.

C) I am having a ball in my classes. There is a buzzing atmosphere most of the time. Despite me telling my students how good they are, they don't know how much they have been improving and that brases me off. They want to be fluent overnight. Anyway, success breeds success. The teacher is happy, the students are happy. The students are happy, the teacher is happy. I like that happy circle!

D) The student roll is on the rise. I now have two Year 10 classes instead of one last Year with 10 students in it.

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