

Using Tasks in Language Teaching

Rod Ellis
University of Auckland
New Zealand

Introducing 'Tasks'

What is a task?

1. A task involves a primary focus on meaning.
2. A task has some kind of 'gap'.
3. The participants choose the linguistic resources needed to complete the task.
4. A task has a clearly defined outcome.

Comparing a task and an exercise

A task

1. Primary focus on trying to communicate
2. There is a gap
3. Text creating
4. Successful performance = outcome of task achieved

An exercise

1. Primary focus on using language correctly
2. There is no gap
3. Text manipulating
4. Successful performance = accurate use of target feature

The Going Shopping Exercise

Look at Mary's shopping list. Then look at the list of items in Abdullah's store.

Mary's Shopping List

- | | |
|------------|------------------|
| 1. oranges | 4. powdered milk |
| 2. eggs | 5. biscuits |
| 3. flour | 6. jam |

Abdullah's Store

- | | |
|-----------------|-------------------|
| 1. bread | 7. rice |
| 2. salt | 8. sugar |
| 3. apples | 9. curry powder |
| 4. tins of fish | 10. biscuits |
| 5. coca cola | 11. powdered milk |
| 6. flour | 12. dried beans |

Work with a partner. One person is Mary and the other person is Mr. Abdullah. Make conversations like this.

Mary: Good morning. Do you have any flour?
Abdullah: Yes, I have some.

The 'What Can You Buy' Task

Student A:

You are going shopping at Student B's store. Here is your shopping list. Put ticks next to the items on your list you can buy.

- | | |
|------------|------------------|
| 1. oranges | 4. powdered milk |
| 2. eggs | 5. biscuits |
| 3. flour | 6. jam |

Student B:

You own a store. Here is a list of items for sale in your store. Find the items that Student A asks for that you do not stock.

- | | |
|-----------------|-------------------|
| 1. bread | 7. rice |
| 2. salt | 8. sugar |
| 3. apples | 9. curry powder |
| 4. tins of fish | 10. biscuits |
| 5. coca cola | 11. powdered milk |
| 6. flour | 12. dried beans |

Two kinds of tasks

1. Real-life tasks

These aim for ‘situational authenticity’ (i.e. they involve the kinds of communicative situations that learners will experience in real life)

2. Pedagogic tasks

These aim for ‘interactional authenticity’ (i.e. they involve interactions with the same characteristics as those that occur in communication outside the classroom).

Unfocused vs. focused tasks

1. Unfocused tasks are tasks that elicit 'general' samples of language use.
2. Focused tasks are designed to focus learners intention on some specific language feature but which still meet the criteria for a task.

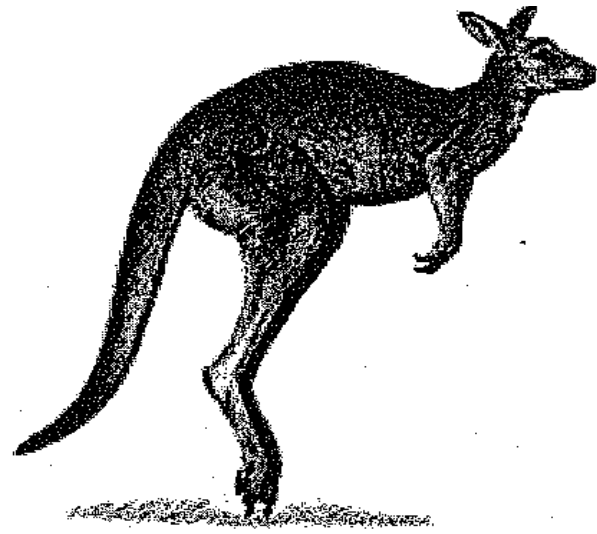
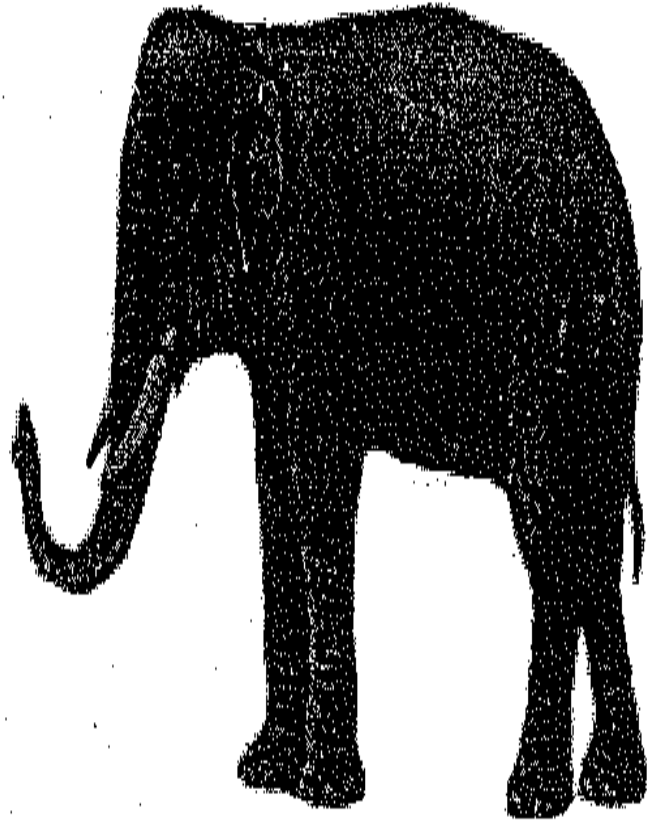
Some Examples of Tasks

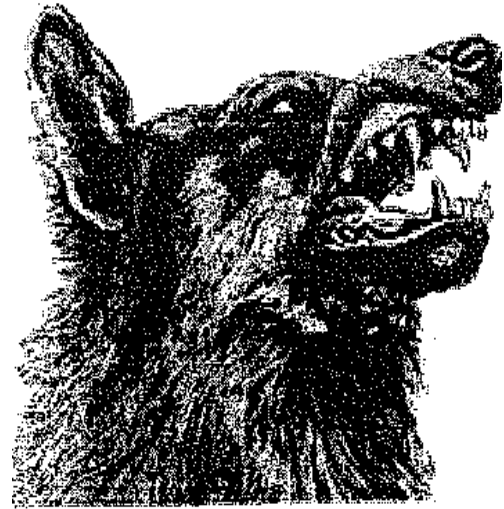
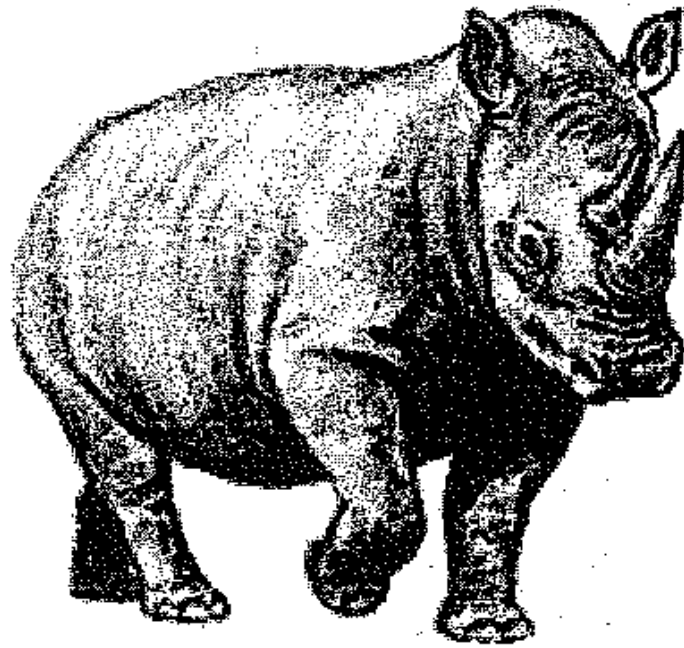
The Animal Task

Instructions

You will see some pictures of animals. Listen carefully. I will describe ONE animal in each set. You must identify which animal I am describing.



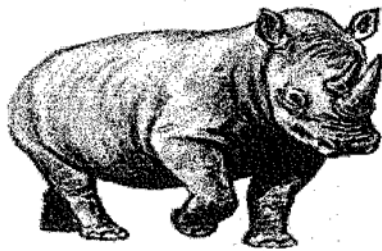
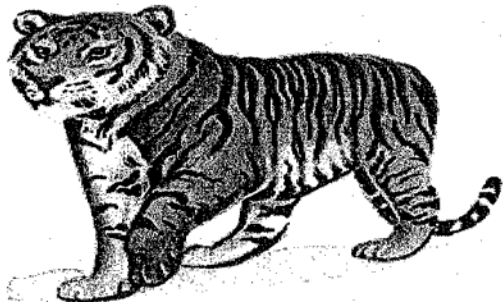




More instructions

Listen to me describe each animal.
Number each animal in the order I
describe them.

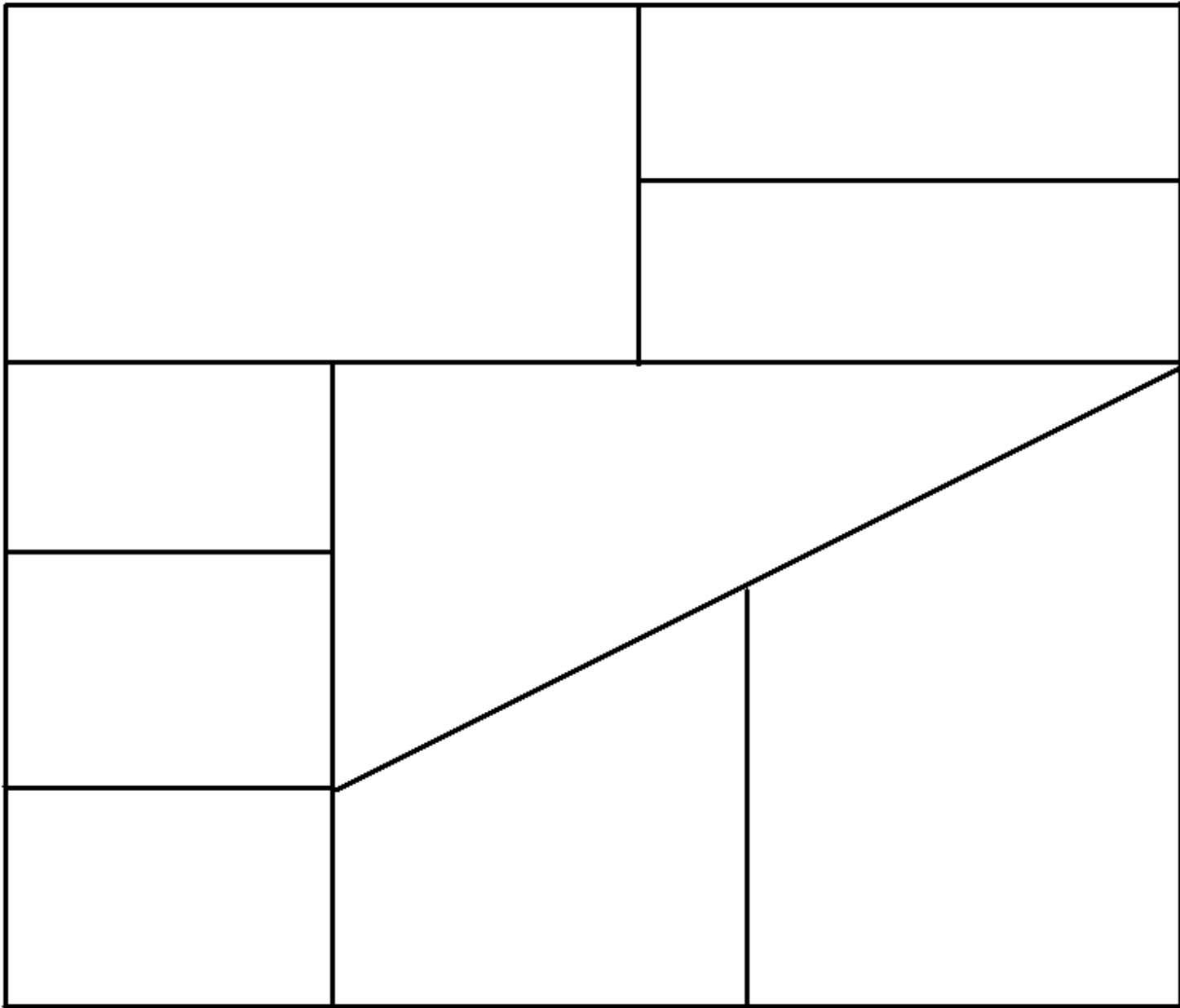
Write the name of each animal.



More instructions

Look at the map of a zoo. It shows the cages where the animals live.

Listen to the descriptions of where they live. Write the name of each animal in its cage.



The Number Game Task

Instructions

We are going to play a number game. Here are the rules.

1. Player A starts by saying either 'One' or 'Two'
2. Player B continues the counting by saying either the next number or the next two numbers.
3. The players continue to take turns to count. At each turn they can say either the next or the next two numbers.
4. The player who reaches 'twenty' first is the winner.

More Instructions

Prepare a set of written instructions about how to play the 'Number Game'.

You must make sure that your instructions are completely clear so that if you gave them to some other students they could play the game correctly.

The 'Things in Pocket' task

Instructions

Work in groups. Each group will be given a set of objects (the contents of a person's pockets). Who do you think the person is?

Complete this chart.

How Certain Are You?

Possible

Probable

Certain

Name

Sex

Age

Marital Status

Analyzing the Tasks

Type of Task

Task	Real-world or pedagogic?	Focused or unfocused?
What can you buy?	Real-world	Unfocused
Animal task	Pedagogic	Unfocused
Number game	Real world (?)	Focused
Things in Pocket	Pedagogic	Focused

Tasks and the Four Language Skills

Skills	What can you buy?	Animal Task	Number Game	Things in Pocket
Listening	Yes	Listening	Yes (limited)	Yes
Speaking	Yes	No	Yes (limited)	Yes
Reading	Yes (limited)	No	Yes	Yes (limited)
Writing	No	No	Yes	No

Task-Based Language Teaching

Comparing task-based and traditional language teaching

Task-based teaching

1. Experiential
2. Caters to incidental language learning
3. The primary focus is on meaning.
4. Learners learn language through learning to communicate.
5. Emphasizes the 'on-line' processing of language.
6. Classroom discourse is 'conversational'
7. The main aim is communicative effectiveness.

Traditional language teaching

1. Analytic
2. Caters to intentional language learning
3. The primary focus is on form.
4. Learners learn language and then later learn to communicate.
5. Emphasises conscious learning and memorization.
6. Classroom discourse is 'didactic'.
7. The main aim is linguistic accuracy.

Why do TBLT?

1. An L2 is best learned through communicating.
2. Students are more likely to develop intrinsic motivation in a task-based approach.
3. A task-based approach enables teachers to see if students are developing the ability to communicate in an L2.

The Task-Based Lesson

Two Aspects of Task-Based Lessons

1. The organisation of task-based lessons
 - pre-task phase
 - main task phrase
 - post-task phase
2. The participatory structure of task-based lessons
 - individual student activity
 - teacher-class activity
 - small group work

The Organisation of Task-Based Lessons

Teaching Strategies in the Pre-Task Phase

1. Support learners in performing a task similar to the main task
2. Provide learners with a model of how the task might be performed.
3. Engage learners in non-task activities designed to help them perform the task.
4. Provide learners with the opportunity to plan how to perform the task.

Performing a Similar Task

Learners perform a similar task with the teacher before they try doing the task on its own (see Prabhu, 1987)

- the pre-task is a task in its own right
- it is performed through teacher-class interaction with the teacher using questions to guide the students to the task outcome
- The main task is performed in groups or by individual students

Providing a Model

- Provide a demonstration of an ideal performance
- Analyse the features of an ideal text
- Train students in the use of a strategy (e.g. asking for clarification)

Non-task Preparation Activities

These are aimed at reducing the cognitive or linguistic load:

- Activating schema relating to topic of the task (e.g. brainstorming)
- Pre-teaching vocabulary (e.g. Newton 2001 - predicting, co-operative dictionary search, matching words and definitions)

Pre-task Planning

Students have access to the task for this type of pre-task activity.

Options:

- Unguided planning
- Guided planning (focus on content vs. focus on linguistic form)
- Time allocated (Mehnert 1998)
- Participatory organisation

Teaching Strategies for the Main-Task Phase

Two sets of options:

- Task-performance options (relating to decisions taken prior to performance of the task)
- Task-process options - focus on form

Task Performance Options

Main options are:

- Performance of task with or without task pressure (Yuan and Ellis 2003)
- Performance of task with or without access to input data ('borrowing' – Prabhu)
- Introduction of surprise element (cf. Foster and Skehan 1997)

Focus on Form

Focus on form involves directing learners' attention to specific linguistic forms in the context of the task performance

Attention to form in the context of performing a task can be:

- Implicit
- Explicit

Implicit Focus on Form

Two principal procedures:

1. Request for clarification (i.e. Speaker A says something that Speaker B does not understand; B requests clarification allowing A opportunity to reformulate)
2. Recast (i.e. Speaker A says something that Speaker B reformulates in whole or in part)

Examples of Implicit Focus on Form

Learner: He pass his house.

Teacher: He passed his house? (= recast)

Learner: Yeah, he passed his house.

Teacher: This animal has a trunk

Learner: What is 'trunk'? (= request for clarification)

Teacher: It has a very long nose.

Explicit Focus on Form

1. Explicit correction (e.g. 'Not x, y')
2. Metalingual comment (e.g. 'Not present tense, past tense')
3. Query (e.g. 'Why is *can* used here?')
4. Advise (e.g. 'Remember you need to use the past tense').

Example of Explicit Focus on Form

Learner: Possibly he is a doctor.

Teacher: Use 'may'.

Learner: He may is a doctor.

Teacher: Not 'is' – 'be'.

Learner: He may be a doctor.

Teaching Strategies for the Post-Task Phase

Three main options:

- Repeat performance
- Reflect on performance of the task
- Focus on accuracy

Repeat the Main Task

Research shows that when learners repeat a task their production improves in a number of ways (e.g. complexity increases, propositions are expressed more clearly, and they become more fluent).

A repeat performance can be carried out under the same conditions as the first performance (i.e. in small groups or individually) or the conditions can be changed.

Reflect on the Task Performance

Students present an oral or written report:

- summarising the outcome of the task.
- reflecting on and evaluating their own performance of the task.
- commenting on which aspect of language use (fluency, complexity or accuracy) they gave primacy to
- discussing communication problems
- reporting what language they learned from the task
- suggesting how they might improve their performance of the task.

This can be done in the learners' L1 or the target language.

Focus on Accuracy

Options include:

- Review of learner errors ('proof listening' – Lynch)
- Use CR tasks
- Provide traditional production practice
- Engage learners in noticing activities (e.g. making a transcript of their performance)

Some General Methodological Principles

1. Ensure an appropriate level of difficulty.
2. Establish clear goals for the performance of the task.
3. Develop an appropriate orientation for performing the task in the students.
4. Ensure the students adopt an active role.
5. Encourage students to take risks.
6. Ensure students are primarily focussed on meaning.
7. Create opportunities for focussing on form.
8. Require students to evaluate their performance and progress.

Participatory Structure of Task-Based Lessons

Types of Participatory Structure

Discussions of task-based teaching are often based on the assumption that the main task will be performed in pairs or small groups but this is a mistaken notion. There are different types of participatory structure.

A. Individual

B. Social

1. Teacher-class
2. Student-class
3. Small group or pair work

Each type affords both advantages and disadvantages. Teachers need to vary the type of participatory structure they use in task-based lessons.

An Example of a Task-Based Lesson

The Main Task

A picture composition is cut up into four separate pictures. The students work in groups of four. Each student has one picture and must not show it to the other students in the group. Each student takes it in turn to describe his/her picture. After they have all done this the students talk together to work out the story.

The Pre-Task Phase

Option: Unguided pre-task planning

Each student is given 6 minutes to look at his/her picture and work out how best to describe it. They can refer to a dictionary to help them

Main Task Phase

This is in two stages:

1. Students describe their pictures and work out how to tell the story. The teacher simply observes the students.
2. Each group takes it in turn to tell the story. When they make an error the teacher corrects it using a mixture of implicit and explicit corrective strategies.

The Post-Task Phase

1. Each student is asked to write out the story.
2. The teacher collects in their written stories and makes a list of the typical errors they are making.
3. The teacher goes over the errors with the whole class – showing what is wrong and how to correct them.

Conclusion

Final Comments

1. Tasks help students to activate their L2 knowledge in communication
2. Tasks also help students to acquire new vocabulary and grammar.
3. Using tasks in the classroom requires teachers to adopt a different role from traditional teaching (i.e. they have to become 'performers' and 'assistants' rather than 'knowers').
4. Tasks can be used to construct a complete course or they can be used alongside more traditional types of teaching activities (i.e. exercises).