

## Task-Based Approach towards Communicative Competence in Foreign Language Teaching

### *El enfoque basado en tareas hacia una competencia comunicativa en la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras*

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#### Resumen

*El aprendizaje basado en tareas, conocido también como enfoque basado en tareas, es un modelo que puede transformar el proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje, tradicionalmente basado en el maestro, en un proceso centrado en el estudiante. Desde esta perspectiva, los estudiantes tienen un papel preponderante en su aprendizaje, con mayor implicación en el establecimiento de objetivos y realizando las acciones necesarias para lograrlos. La solución de problemas y el logro de tareas cercanas a sus experiencias personales y profesionales estimulan su motivación y promueven el aprendizaje significativo. Por ello, el presente trabajo tiene como fin elucidar aspectos esenciales relacionados con el enfoque por tareas y el desarrollo de la competencia comunicativa. Con tal objetivo, fueron utilizados métodos como el histórico-lógico, análisis-síntesis, inducción-deducción, abstracto-concreto. Además, se ofrecen ejemplos de estas tareas.*

**Palabras clave:** *enfoque por tareas; competencia comunicativa; enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras*

#### Abstract

Task-based learning, also known as task-based approach, is a model that can transform the teaching-learning process, traditionally based on the teacher, into a process centered on the learner. From this perspective, learners have a leading role in their learning process, with greater involvement in setting goals and taking the necessary actions to achieve them. The solution of problems and the accomplishment of tasks close to their personal and professional experiences stimulate their motivation and promote meaningful learning. Therefore, the present paper aims at elucidating substantial aspects related to the task-based approach and the development of communicative competence. To this end, methods such as historical-logical, analysis-synthesis, induction-deduction, abstract-concrete were used. As well, examples of such tasks are provided.

**Keywords:** : task-based approach; communicative competence; foreign language



## Introduction

Task-based learning, also known as task-based approach, is a model that can transform the teaching-learning process, traditionally based on the teacher, into a process centered on the learner. From this perspective, learners have a leading role in their learning process, with greater involvement in setting goals and taking the necessary actions to achieve them. The solution of problems and the accomplishment of tasks close to their personal and professional experiences stimulate their motivation and promote meaningful learning.

The task-based approach proposes the organization of the course in terms of a final task or set of tasks, which enables the treatment of different contents. In its implementation, learners develop the skills and competences required for their linguistic training. From this conception, the active role and autonomy of the students is increased, as well as cooperation and exchange to foster innovation and creativity to achieve the goals planned.

Task-based language teaching proposes the use of tasks as a central component in the language classroom because they provide better contexts for activating learner acquisition processes and promoting foreign language learning. Richards and Rodgers (2001) state that this is because tasks are believed to foster processes of negotiation, modification, rephrasing, and experimentation that are at the heart of second language learning.

This approach considers language learners as social agents, that is, as members of society, who have tasks to perform in given circumstances, in a specific environment and within a specific field of action. It is based on the execution of tasks, carried out by one or more individuals, through the use of their skills, to achieve a specific result. The action-based approach, therefore, also takes into account cognitive, emotional and volitional resources, as well as specific capacities that an individual applies as a social agent.

The use of language – which includes learning – comprises the actions carried out by people who, as individuals and as social agents, develop competences, general and communicative-linguistic. To achieve these purposes, they use skills that are at their disposal in different contexts and under certain conditions and restrictions. Hence, in order to carry out activities that involve the use of the language to produce and receive texts related to topics in specific areas, it is advisable to use strategies that seem more appropriate for carrying out the tasks to be performed. The control of these actions by the participants produces the reinforcement or modification of their competences.

Therefore, the present paper aims at elucidating substantial aspects related to the task-based approach and the development of communicative competence. To this end, methods such as historic-logical, analysis-synthesis, induction-deduction, abstract-concrete were used.



## Communicative approach, communicative competence and task-based approach

From the conceptions of the communicative approach, the development of communicative competence is the final goal in the teaching-learning process of languages. This is achieved through the development of necessary procedures for the learner to enhance the four linguistic skills, based on the interdependence between languages and communication (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). In the eighties, researchers began to present a wide variety of studies related to the task-based approach, which has been considered as the natural evolution of the communicative method. This approach is based on the existence of a task and an objective to be achieved after solving tasks that will guide the language learner towards the fulfillment of a given goal while developing linguistic and pedagogical tools necessary for its resolution.

Richards and Rodgers (2001) consider the task-based approach supports on communicative and interactive tasks as central units for the planning and development of instruction. According to this researcher, tasks should provide the foundation for learning from one language to the demand of meaningful communication, negotiation and sharing of meanings and enable students learning grammar as a result of their involvement in the use of language authentically. This approach is an extension from the principles of the communicative approach.

The task-based approach, as a didactic orientation, takes the language learning needs as a starting point to determine what students may be able to do with the language, which tasks are essential in situations relevant to them, and what level of performance is required for its successful realization. In this sense, tasks are primary units of description for the selection of targets, rather than certain components of the language system such as learning the grammar rules or the vocabulary.

Communication and learning involve the performance of tasks that are not solely language tasks, even though they involve language activities and make demands upon the individual's communicative competence. To the extent that these tasks are neither routine nor automatic, learners require the use of strategies in communicating and learning, as well as processing (through reception, production, interaction or mediation) of oral or written texts.

Addressing this approach requires the analysis of the term task, assumed by many researchers to designate the interaction between student and language content in the teaching-learning process. The proposals of Nunan (1989); Willis and Willis (1998); Richards and Rodgers (1998, 2001); Oxford (2006); Medina (2012) and other authors provide elements of interest for the purposes of the present work.

For Nunan (2004), the task is a part of class work that involves students in understanding, manipulating, producing or interacting with the target language, while attention is focused primarily on meaning rather than on form.



The task is also an activity that is designed to achieve a certain learning objective and its dimensions influence its use in the teaching of a language. These dimensions include objectives, procedures students use to complete a task, expected results, learning strategies that its execution demands, the way in which the result will be evaluated, and participation, related to its development individually, in pairs or in groups.

Ellis (2003) considers the task as a work plan that requires students to process language in a pragmatic way to achieve a result that can be evaluated. This involves attention to meaning and use of the linguistic resources available to the student, although the design of the task can require the use of particular forms.

The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) defines the task as any intentional action that an individual considers necessary to achieve a specific result in terms of solving a problem. Task accomplishment by an individual involves the strategic activation of specific competences in order to carry out a set of purposeful actions in a particular domain with a clearly defined goal and a specific outcome.

Tasks actively involve learners in meaningful communication, are relevant and challenging but feasible, and have identifiable outcomes, which are real and practical. Students can track their progress in developing language skills by their ability to carry out realistic tasks that help them interact communicatively and purposefully. The difficulty of a task depends on a range of factors including the previous experience of the learner, the complexity of the tasks, and the degree of support available.

As Willis and Willis (1998) state, tasks can have a variety of starting points: they may be based on a written text, or a recording of spoken data, or visual data, and/or they may draw on learners' own input, on their personal experience or their knowledge of the world. They could be games, demonstrations, interviews or a combination of several of these.

Tasks can be varied in nature, and may involve language activities to a greater or lesser extent. On the other hand, they may be quite simple or extremely complex and may involve a number of steps or embedded subtasks.

Consequently, the boundaries of a task may be difficult to define. A task intends to provoke the use of the language very similar to the way in which it is used in the real world and can involve productive and receptive skills, orally or in the written form, and different cognitive processes.

Communication is an essential part of the tasks in which the participants carry out activities of interaction, expression, understanding or mediation, or a combination of two or more of them. Communicative tasks require students to understand, negotiate, and express meanings in order to achieve a communicative objective. Its realization is related to both the meaning and the way it is understood, expressed and negotiated. Therefore, there should be balance in the attention given to meaning and form, to fluency and correction, when selecting and sequencing tasks.



Communicative tasks of a pedagogical character (as opposed to the exercises that specifically focus on decontextualized practice of formal aspects) involve learners in meaningful communication, pose a difficulty, but are, in turn, feasible and have identifiable results. These tasks may include meta-communicative tasks or subtasks, that is, a communication about the implementation of the task and about the language used to carry it out, which also includes the implication of the student in the selection, control and evaluation of the task, in a language learning context.

In the consulted literature there is consensus in recognizing the potentialities of the task-based approach in the field of education and school. Its many attributes and features will give a capacity analysis viable, useful and meaningful, as they are small units that cater to very important aspects within the curriculum. The conceptions emphasize the potential of the task for:

- diagnosis and monitoring of the student's needs.
- critical analysis of curricular contents and the planning of actions that promote personal and professional growth of the student.
- the acquisition of the foreign language, in an environment of negotiation and exchange, which allows the determination of goals attainable by the student in a certain period of time.

Tasks are also an educational activity, so they should be attractive and motivating for foreign language learners. They are supposed to involve the learner in such a way that, while acquiring a command of the language, he develops the required competencies and gets in touch with the cultural elements of that language. This is another demonstrative element of the relevance of addressing questions regarding the way of designing, sequencing and organizing tasks presented to the learner.

As an educationally appropriate activity, tasks should have a close link between what is discussed in the classroom and what exists in the real world. Tasks designed by language teachers must be related to those situations and credible contexts that surround the student. For this reason, they have to involve the student in active and spontaneous use of the language as a user, and not as a learner (Van der Branden, 2006). In Cuban Higher Education, a context in which the authors develop their professional activity, the task must, in addition to promoting the development of communicative competence in English, prepare the students to meet the standards required in the certification process, which establishes CEFR level A2 as a goal.

The traditional presentation-practice-production (PPP) teaching/learning cycle was at one time virtually the only acceptable for task sequence. In the PPP cycle, grammar presentation came first, followed by controlled and less controlled practice and then by actual production. However, Willis and Willis' (1998) task-based model offers a task cycle that opposes the PPP sequence. In this model, which effectively combines meaning and form, the communicative task



comes before the focus on form (language analysis and practice). Another significant feature is that the learner not only performs the task but also reports it.

Task-based learning has a holistic approach. The students carry out a communicative task making use of the linguistic resources available to them. Research on the subject suggests that it is only after the cycle of tasks has been completed that students' attention is directed to specific forms of language.

Their framework consists of the following phases:

- Pre-task - introduction to the topic and task.
- Task cycle: task planning, doing the task, preparing to report on the task and presenting the task report.
- Language focus - analysis and practice (focus on form).

Other authors have discussed how to sequence tasks to reflect the developmental sequence of language acquisition. It has been suggested to work with a variety of structures rather than with an isolated one using the usefulness factor to optimize learning.

Another aspect to be considered when analyzing the foundations of the task base-approach is learners' individual differences such as learning styles, learning strategies, age, gender, and culture, which are factors that influence the development of language learning. Among those variables, learning styles and learning strategies are variables relating to learners' performance in completing their language tasks. Moreover, learners' learning styles influences their choices of learning strategies.

What are, then, the basic assumptions of task-based language teaching? This is a summary:

- The focus of instruction is on process rather than product.
- Basic elements are purposeful activities and tasks that emphasize communication and meaning.
- Students learn the language by interacting communicatively and purposefully while engaged in meaningful tasks.
- Activities and tasks can be either those that learners might need to achieve in real life or those that have a pedagogical purpose specific to the classroom.
- Activities and tasks of a task-based syllabus can be sequenced according to difficulty.



- The difficulty of a task depends on a range of factors including the previous experience of the learner, the complexity of the tasks, and the degree of support available (quoted by Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

The study developed on the topic is essential for implementing CEFR premises, with the necessary adjustments to any particular context. The examples of tasks provided in the paper respond to the conceptions assumed by the authors. The tasks meet the requirements of the A1 (Starter) level of the CEFR and have been designed and implemented with first-year students of the Journalism Major in the University of Holguin. The tasks are aimed at treating the content of this level and correspond to the requirements stated in the descriptors. Although the tasks presented are aimed at promoting the development of oral expression, they also enhance its integration with the other aspects of the verbal activity.

The tasks proposed are organized in three phases: a *prep phase* (orientation and activation of previous knowledge), a *development phase* (where students interact with the task) and a *closing phase* (so-called post task where skill integration and critical assessments are exploited). During the different moments that the tasks go through, the instructions are simple, clear and sufficient, and they are carried out in pairs and/or groups. This facilitates communication and mutual collaboration between students. The tasks also contribute to the treatment of the topics, the structures of language and the typology used in the certification exams that are applied, which favors the students' successful training and completion of the assignments.

## Examples of task-based approach tasks

### Task 1: Meeting new people

Preparation task

Tasks

1. Group work: Ask the students, first in groups and then as a whole, to come up with ten questions, answers to which they would like to have in order to get to know someone in the classroom. Once the class has agreed on a list of questions, send the students back into their groups to put these questions into a logical order. Come back together again and agree upon an order. At this point, each student should pair up with another student, preferably one from a different group. They should ask each other the questions, making note of the answers -so they can introduce their partner to the class as a whole.

Post task:

A. Which of the following greetings are typical in your country? Tick the ones you think and compare with your partner.



- a) a hug.
- b) a handshake.
- c) a pat on the back.
- d) a kiss on the cheek.
- e) a bow.

B. Work in pairs. Write the name of a country where these greetings are used.

C. Get ready to dramatize a dialogue about personal information. Use the greetings above.

D. Class activity: Take notes on the information provided by your classmates and get ready to report orally.

“Their names are... They live in ...”

## Task 2: Talking about families

Preparation task: Make word webs about family and jobs. Write a sentence about each word. Then compare with your partner, use the example below as a model.

Tasks

1. Class activity: Go around the class and find this information. Write a classmate’s name only once. Ask follow up questions on your own.

Find someone...

- who is an only child (Do you have any brothers or sisters?).
- who has a brother and a sister.
- who lives with his/her grandparents.
- whose mother/father works long hours.
- who has a family member with an usual job.

Class activity: Compare your information.



2. Group work. The students bring pictures of their families. One student shows the pictures and his/her group mates ask questions. Then they take turns showing their pictures and exchanging information about them.

Post task: Tell the class about your family.

"I have one brother and two sisters. My brother's name is Paul, he is a lawyer, he loves his job. My sister ..."

### Task 3: Describing routines

Tasks:

Group work. Number the free time activities below from 1 (you like the most) to 6 (you like the least).

\_\_\_ watch TV.

\_\_\_ listen to music.

\_\_\_ go to the gym.

\_\_\_ go out with friends.

\_\_\_ help with the housework.

\_\_\_ play video games.

A. Add two more activities to your list.

B. Get ready to read your list to the class. Support your selection.

C. Listen to the lists proposed by your classmates and get ready to ask follow up questions (What are your favorite TV programs? When do you go to the gym? How often do you clean the house? What kind of music do you prefer?)

Post task:

Group work: Take a poll of your routines. Take turns asking each person these questions.

a) What time do you get up on weekdays?

b) How do you travel from home to school?



c) Do you ever exercise? How often do you do it?

d) What do you do after school?

e) What do you do on weekends?

- Class activity: Compare your routine with your classmates' routines. Whose schedule is the most like yours? Tell the class.

- Suppose you have a pen friend who lives in England. Write a letter telling him/her about your routine. You may use the previous questions as a guide for writing.

## Conclusion

The management of the teaching-learning process according to the CEFR postulates gives special attention to the task-based approach. Under these conceptions, the foreign language learner uses a wide and varied range of resources and procedures to achieve a specific objective, while developing the skills and competencies necessary to cope with the demands made under the teacher's guidance.

The task-based approach fosters high levels of communication between students and between them and the teacher, who as a guide, mediator and facilitator of learning, leads a process focused on the students, their strengths and needs in foreign language learning. The task-based approach also potentiates constant assessment of the results achieved and the search for alternatives that may require a student to overcome their limitations from the linguistic point and set new goals, promoting the development of strategies to learn independently.

The tasks planned under the conceptions assumed in this approach encourage language learning and skill training. The fulfillment of tasks demands the use of the learners' own communicative abilities to shift from their mother tongue to the target language. Besides, tasks provide opportunities for learning in a cooperative way and prepare the students to use the target language with specific professional purposes. The tasks presented contribute to the development of the students' communicative competence at an early stage of the language learning process, providing them a natural context for language use and increasing their motivation towards the language lesson.

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## Conflict of interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests

