

# LEARNER- TEACHER INVESTIGATION OF CONCORDANCE SAMPLES OF REAL LIFE WITHIN A TASK-BASED LEARNING FRAMEWORK

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## Abstract

Classroom teaching and learning center on specific language tasks. Instruction becomes more effective when teachers understand the role of language tasks, recognize their students' needs and apply information in a sound and creative way. The teacher is not a walking thesaurus, a dictionary or a grammar on the other hand, conventional reference works like grammar books are often unsatisfactory when it comes to answering students' linguistic queries, so we wanted to try out using concordances as an alternative. This research aims to investigate the problems embedded in TBLT. It describes how we introduced a task-based process with our business students where teacher explanations of problematic language are replaced by learner-teacher investigation of concordance samples of real life. So, an aspect of language is the topic of our task. We worked collaboratively through this task-based research process to see to what extent samples of real life can answer a teacher's and learners' questions. By establishing language itself as the topic for tasks which are executed through research within a clear framework we may discover more not only about language but also about classroom interactions and ourselves as learners.

**Keywords:** *Task-based research process, language, learner, interaction, concordance.*

## Introduction

TBLT has drawn the attention of many researchers due to its focus on process-based syllabi designed to increase learners' actual language use for communicative purposes. There are various interpretations of TBLT connected with classroom practice, but most scholars agree on three common features: TBLT is a student-centered approach (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Richards & Rodgers, 2001); it includes particular components such as goal, procedure and specific outcome (Murphy, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Skehan 1998); it advocates content-based and meaning-based tasks rather than linguistic forms ( Beglar & Hunt, 2002; Carless, 2002; Littlewood, 2004).

Language acquisition is a very complex process which is influenced by a number of variables including materials, feedback and activities and TBLT has a positive effect on these variables. It provides learners with meaningful and authentic materials, real life communicative activities and supportive feedback giving greater opportunities for language use. Particularly in a country like Albania where learners are limited in their possibilities to use English outside the classroom, it is necessary for language learners to be provided with real opportunities for target language use in the classroom.

Despite the pedagogical benefits of the approach, TBLT has not been implemented without its difficulties. The aim of this study is to investigate the problems embedded in TBLT and to see to what extent samples of real life can answer a teacher's and learners' questions. This will provide insight for teachers to design and implement real communicative tasks which are particularly important for EFL learners in order to make use of meaningful language. At the same time, it will improve learners' communicative abilities and facilitate teachers' use of TBLT techniques.

### **Theoretical background**

The view of task-based teaching has evolved in response to some limitations of the traditional PPP approach (presentation, practice and performance). As such, it has the implication that language learning is a developmental process promoting communication and social interaction rather than a product acquired by practicing language items, and that learners learn the target language more effectively when they are naturally exposed to meaningful task-based activities. During the nineties, such a view has developed into a practical framework for the communicative classroom in which learners perform task-based activities through cycles of pre-task, task performance and post-task feedback through language focus ( Skehan, 1996; Willis, 1996).

Despite the prevalent use of tasks in language pedagogy, some challenges concerning the design of proper task-based syllabi and authentic task-based materials, which have been considered to be decisive factors in determining the effectiveness of TBLT in communicative classrooms, still remain unresolved. For this reason, researchers' attention is moving from conceptualizing tasks to implementing them in classroom practice.

### **Task as a central unit for communicative classroom**

First of all it is necessary to give a proper definition of "task" in order to construct useful tasks for communicative classrooms. Among various interpretations of the definition of tasks, Nunan (1998) suggests that tasks can be conceptualized in terms of the specific goals they are intended to serve, the input data, which forms the point of departure for the task, and the related procedures, which the learners undertake in the completion of the task. Willis (1998) defines a task as an activity in which the target language is used for a communicative purpose in order to achieve an outcome. Skehan (1998) represents the core features of tasks within four defining criteria: there is a goal to be worked towards; the activity is outcome-evaluated; meaning is primary; and there is a real-world

relationship. Candlin and Muphy (1987) assert that tasks can be effectively organized based on systematic components including goals, input, setting, activities, roles and feedback.

Goals refer to the general aim of the task and input refers to verbal or non-verbal materials that learners can manipulate. Setting refers to the environment in which the task is performed and activities include things that participants will be doing in a given setting. The roles of teacher and learner are closely related to the successful implementation of the task and feedback has to do with task evaluation. As Cray and Currie (1996) suggest, the important point is that teachers do not have to act on behalf of their learners but with their learners. Attention needs to be given to students' ways of learning and their perceptions and unless teachers are aware of those perceptions they cannot consider them in their teaching activities and classroom practices.

The framework of task components provides researchers with meaningful insights in designing task-based syllabi and authentic material development that can serve as a starting point for task-based activities.

#### *Task components for the successful implementation of TBLT*

*Goals* serve as a guideline in the process of task performance and provide a point of contact between the task and the broader curriculum (Nunan, 1989), involving a variety of perspectives based on communicative, socio-cultural and cognitive awareness (Clark, 1987). They include a broad range of pedagogical objectives from general outcomes (e.g., improving learners' communicative competence or developing language skills) to specific ones (e.g., making a room reservation or hiring a car in the target language). Of great importance are the instructions given to the participants to manipulate the materials and the results of that experience. Goals should properly reflect learners' needs and interests in order to stimulate their motivation for language use. Stevick (1980) asserts that "success depends less on materials and techniques and more on what goes on inside the learner."

*Input data* refer to verbal or non-verbal materials, which task participants have to deal with when performing a task. Verbal materials can be written or spoken language, whereas non-verbal materials include pictures, diagrams, photos, maps, charts etc. Input data can be derived from a wide range of sources in a real world context. Hover (1986) provides a long list of all the kinds of written sources which surround us. As for verbal materials, Brown and Yule (1983) indicate that dialogue texts containing description or instruction are much easier for learners to comprehend and manipulate than non-dialogue texts, which include arguments or abstract concepts. Input data should also reflect learners' needs and interests, encouraging positively the use of target language.

*Classroom setting* refers to a certain environment, where each task is performed. Wright (1987) suggests the different ways in which learners might be grouped physically based on individual, pair, small group and whole class mode. Anderson and Lynch (1988) advocate the effectiveness of group work compared to that of individual work for general pedagogic reasons (e.g., increasing the cooperation and cohesiveness among learners), and Pica and Doughty (1985) mention the positive role of group work in promoting a linguistic environment likely to assist L2 learning. On the other hand, Li and Adamson (1992) indicate that advanced students preferred individual work to group or

whole class work based on their beliefs that group activities would not be helpful in improving their academic grades. As a conclusion, the classroom arrangement should be flexible rather than fixed, allowing the participants to feel free and make use of different settings in various learning contexts, and the teacher should have dynamic roles in controlling class modes.

The literature of task-based research shows that a lot of studies have been concentrated on exploring *activity types* that best stimulate interactive language use in real world or classroom situations. One of the most general classifications was proposed by Prabhu (1987), based on three principal activity types including information gap, reasoning gap and opinion gap activities. On the other hand, there exist various findings among researchers, on this topic. Pica and Doughty (1985) found that two-way information gap games (e.g., all learners in a group discussion have unique information to contribute) stimulated significantly more modified interactions than one-way information gap activities (e.g., one member of the group has all the relevant information). Grellet (1981) proposed that learners could develop flexible communication strategies through matching activities based on inferring the meaning of unknown elements. Crookall and Oxford (1990) indicated the effective use of role-plays by encouraging the students to develop and practice new language and by creating the motivation and involvement necessary for real learning to occur. All these findings revealed that each activity type had its own strong points in facilitating language learning, thus, helping learners develop their own strategies.

*Assessment* of task-based performance is very different from traditional tests in that it involves either the observation of behavior in the real world or a simulation of a real-life activity in a pedagogical setting (Bachman, 2002). By using tasks for assessment, we not only replicate real-life activities, but also make an attempt to get an accurate picture of learners' communicative abilities. A carefully designed peer assessment is believed to develop learners' communication skills with their group members by providing support as well as challenging their group members to realize their potential (Johnson & Johnson, 1994). Finally, task-based assessment includes many variables and therefore teachers are required to start with a clear purpose and right steps. The authenticity of tasks is very important, too, in order to guarantee the fairness of the evaluation scores.

As a conclusion, a task in itself does not guarantee its successful implementation if the teacher, the facilitator and controller of task performance, does not understand how it actually work in the classroom. Furthermore, TBLT as an instructional method is much more than giving tasks to learners and evaluating their performance. The teacher, who is trying to implement it successfully, is required to have appropriate knowledge about the task-based framework related to its plan, procedure and assessment.

## **Context and method**

“What is the difference between *salary* and *wages*?” “What does *just* mean?” How do we as teachers deal with such questions about meaning, appropriacy, collocation or structural patterns?

Despite learner expectations of teacher omniscience, the teacher is not a walking thesaurus, a bilingual dictionary, or a grammar. Even these sources sometimes may not give satisfactory

answers to students' questions. There are other interesting ways to consulting reference books and these give learners a richer language learning experience.

The capabilities of computers to provide banks of stored language (**corpora**) and to find out and organize these corpora in a systematic format (**concordance** lines) gives an immense source of material for task-based learning where learners can explore and find meanings. "Students need to discover and internalize regularities in the language they are studying. If we can place students in the position of researchers this will accomplish these goals neatly and economically.(Willis, 1998: 45)"

This report shows how we worked collaboratively through a task-based research process to see how samples of real language can answer a teacher's and learners' questions.

The students we were working with were studying at the Faculty of Economics and Environment in the AUT. They were students of the first year and most of them were of intermediate level. They had to take English for two hours a week as a structured course in ESP, so we helped them linguistically with the business content aspects of their studies, since they had to write short reports and make presentations for their course assignments.

One of my students asked me a question based on contrasting sentences in our business course, asking about the exact meaning and usage of the word *due*:

Payment is due *on*...

Inflation is due *to*...

During our discussion in class, students began to realize that one sentence was related to **time** while the other was related to **cause**. From their lexicon, other questions sprung out: "Which is the meaning of *in due course* ...? or "What about *this bill is due* ?" Clearly, the students had created a field of enquiry.

This gave us the opportunity for research where both, teacher and learners had a common starting point: the admission of linguistic ignorance.

We decided to invest time and energy in this language investigation because we found out that the ready-made answers in dictionaries do not last for a long time. Stevens (1995) points out that "Data-driven learning (DDL) is distinct from other inductive models of learning in that the teacher facilitates student research into the language without knowing in advance what rules or patterns the learners will discover." The data in our research is taken from the COBUILD Corpus Concordance Sampler drawn from a bank of 56 million words in contemporary British and American usage, available free on the Internet. As an alternative to computer-based corpora, Willis (1998) demonstrates how teachers and learners without computer access also have the option to construct their own manageable corpora and concordances of commonly occurring words such as prepositions "by hand" from texts relevant to students' needs.

We chose Willis's (1996a/b) TBL framework because its stages correspond with our stages of planning the research, executing and reporting back the findings of it. Based on Willis's stages we

made a lesson plan. Regarding time, learners decided it, although some teachers like to be more rigorous with timing the pre-task and post-task activities. Usually, it takes longer the first time because of the new text and task types. It wasn't just *due* they were learning about, but a lot of collocations and other useful words and phrases that appeared in the concordance lines and that they also wanted to explore.

The TBL framework gives not only a structure but also principles. The focus on discovering and negotiating meaning through task fulfilment remains primary. The task, in class, parallels a "real-world" activity while keeping a real goal within the classroom. The interaction between learners during the process of discovery and reporting is of great value for the task. They make hypothesis, seek clarification and improve their knowledge. The learners also consider of great importance the completion of the task and its outcome because are they that have stressed the need to find out about that particular piece of language.

### Task outcome

From the discovery process we got the following results. Working with this particular COBUILD sample (see Appendix 1), we found out that "*due to*" occurred in 25/40 instances. As for the rest of *due* + preposition, we saw that "*due for*" was followed by a noun/ noun phrase, that the only occurrence of "*due at*" referred to place (one of the students pointed out that apart this sample, it could also support a time reference.) I suggested that "*to give him his due*" should be taken as a fixed phrase. We corrected our "*due to*" from 25 to 26 when we noticed that they were in fact separable: "*due no doubt in part to ...*" We proposed a list of items that can be put between *due* and *to*; for example, to an extent; in the main, up to a point – qualifying expressions with an idea of measurement.

We also noticed that many "*due to*" phrases could be referred to as **Cause** (*due to the effects of global warming*) or **Time** (*Mr Davis had been due to fly*). I proposed the synonyms *expected* or *scheduled* for "*due to*" in Time sentences, and *because of* in Cause sentences. We found out that 9 out of 26 "*due to*" expressions were **Cause**; the others were **Time**.

Moving from a focus on meaning to a focus on form we discovered that "*due to*" occurred with active verbs 10 out of 26 times (*due to go*); with passive 6 times (*due to be named*). "*Due to*" can also be followed by a noun /noun phrase (*due to characteristics*). However, in the expression "*due to the bank*" the meaning is *owed to* not *expected*, so another revision of categories is needed in this case. Finally, in the phrase "*due to the fact that*", we agreed that *the fact that* was not redundant because it allows a subject + verb to be added.

### Reflection and evaluation: feedback

Students usually have mixed reactions when introduced to new methodologies, and this became apparent in their discussions about how they felt immediately after the completion of the task cycle. The fact that they were not new to the task and its framework helped them a lot. They had done similar projects with researching, language planning and reporting stages. The only difference was

that they had not done research into language itself; they were not at ease with a concordance layout and were afraid of the density of the text. The majority of the students were satisfied that they had overcome the initial difficulties and had succeeded in discovering valuable things for themselves. Only a few of them would have preferred the teacher to explain all the things for them. It is important to state that it was not our aim to use this type of activity in order to replace the more familiar methodologies, but this was another option to be used time after time ( with the help of the teacher or independently) to give an answer to various questions about language. Another important aspect of the research done within a clear framework was the fact that we discovered more about classroom interaction and ourselves as learners especially in terms of communicative turntaking, backchanneling, etc.

## Conclusions

There is an increasing amount of interest in using TBLT as an instructional method, because it is believed that task-based learning has benefits for increasing learners' communicative skills and their interaction.

- Tasks not only give variety to the language teaching methodology but also make the classroom more interesting and effective. They increase learners' motivation and create a lively atmosphere that makes the instruction more creative and in line with the students' needs.
- A task in itself does not guarantee its successful implementation if the teacher, the facilitator and controller of task performance, does not understand how it actually work in the classroom. TBLT as an instructional method is much more than giving tasks to learners and evaluating their performance. The teacher, who is trying to implement it successfully, is required to have appropriate knowledge about the task-based framework related to its plan, procedure and assessment.
- The aim of the research was to investigate the problems embedded in TBLT. An aspect of language was the topic of our task. We worked collaboratively through this task-based research process to see to what extent samples of real life can answer a teacher's and learners' questions. By establishing language itself as the topic for tasks which were executed through research within a clear framework we discovered more not only about language but also about classroom interactions and ourselves as learners.
- Finally, we encourage teachers to adapt this approach in their classrooms and do their best to promote TBLT.

## Appendix 1

### Collins COBUILD Concordance for *due*

see things in the same light. Mr Li is due at the Airbus headquarters in the Watts last night. They could be due compensation if they can prove their enveloped in a white-out blizzard. In due course, my companion made it to the How to pay [h] Council Tax will be due for payment from April 1993. Payment have an existing policy which is not due for renewal just yet, you can switch a new film entitled Pentathalon, due for release next year, in which he Is the Jet-X space telescope, due for launch on a soviet space mission of State since Merry del Val, he was due for disappointment. Paul VI did not 000 from a greatest hits collection due for release next month, [p] the screen, lp] Which, to give him his due, he does very well. And round about Pyracantha outside my kitchen window, due no doubt in part to the exceptional them-especially with their first child due. Not wanting to move to a new area sounds utterly astonishing It's due out in May. [p] Still on 4AD, The konjo {f} character). Whenever I was due punishment, I was made acutely aware the danger zone where a test was due to take place, [p] For several are already available, and Winter is due to be added shortly. All four ‘ amount shown In the statement to be due to the Bank or £5 (or the full the River Thames has flooded its banks due to the effects of global warming. hooks are particularly prone to damage due to their elongated, ultra fine sharp this morning. Management and men are due to meet in Calais later today, but Punjab is grim. He said that this is due to the fact that Pakistan has now Most of the price rise has been due to speculation In the oil market and arms reduction in Europe is due to be signed. One opportunity for ELECTIONS [h] Parliamentary elections due to be held in Egypt on Thursday will eastern Germany. All 380, 000 are due to be out by 1994 by agreement. But, the Interior Ministry. The Sabor is due to decide on this in an hour. The “ Nonetheless the Secretary-General is due to go to Geneva this weekend and indigestible South African grass, and, due to Roberts’ economies, there was *not* up. Shortly after that evening I was due to see him at his home at Cardiff, year if it passes certification tests due to begin in January, [p] The State Lottery, [p] Mr Davis had been due to fly on to GTech’s head office in the damage or of its being severe was due to characteristics of the animal British Energy, the nuclear company due to be sold In mid-summer, Ralltrack [p] A provisional World Cup 14 is due to be named by England either later police and sheriff’s departments due to old rivalries. They wouldn’t vanguard of corporate casualties all due to unveil lousy figures and the news ‘ can we expect A greatly enhanced game due to its CD-Rom format? Well, there’s [h] [b] Ian Key [b] [p] A WOMAN due to become her city’s next Lord Mayor Derek Hunt, 52. [p] The heatwave – due to cool this weekend – took a toll be a shortfall if the mortgage falls due when the stock market is weak. If

*Collins COBUILD: Sample concordance for **due** (British written).*

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