

CAPE Alumni Internet Connection: English Teacher Talk

CAPE Internet Talk was started as part of CAPE follow-up activities to continue ties with CAPE alumni and those who are interested in professional development in English teaching. It is hoped that this would increase our bond and aloha among former participants, and that the information in the TALK would help our alumni and friends/members review what you know and deepen their understanding of issues of interest in the ESL field.

Task-Based Activities

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Currently there is much discussion about task-based teaching and many definitions of what task-based teaching is. Here we will describe one approach to task-based teaching, one influenced by the work of Dave and Jane Willis (*Doing Task-based Teaching*, 2007, Oxford University Press). To begin, it is helpful to explain what we mean by a task. A task is basically a communicative activity that has a specific language-learning objective. Task-based activities include tasks like listing items that belong to a certain category, classifying items into groups, comparing similar items and sharing personal experiences. While the focus of tasks is always on meaning, there is also a focus on form and the development of language proficiency.

Willis and Willis (2007) talk about four stages in task-based teaching. They involve the following

- The preparation for the task
- The completion of the task
- The reporting of the outcome of the task
- A focus on the language used in the task

Let us take a specific example to illustrate the four stages of a task.

The first stage involves preparation for the vocabulary and structures that will likely be used in completing a task. For instance, if a task requires students to compare two pictures that are very similar but have several minor differences, students will likely need to use phrases such as “In the first picture there is/are... whereas in the second picture there is/are.....” Or students might use other sentences of comparison and contrast such as “The first picture shows... On the other hand, the second picture has...” The students will also need vocabulary to name what is in the picture and descriptive adjectives to provide details regarding the objects shown in the picture.

Thus, in order for students to successfully complete the task of comparing and contrasting two pictures, students need to be familiar with particular grammatical and lexical structures. Teachers can be certain this will occur if they either select tasks for which they believe students have the necessary language or introduce the needed language through the completion of a similar task. What is important is that teachers anticipate the language needed for the completion of a particular task and teach students

the necessary language. One way teachers can determine what language students will need for an activity is for teachers to complete the task themselves.

The next stage in a task-based activity is for students, either individually or in groups, to complete the task. In this case, students would be given two similar pictures and asked to list as many differences as they can find between the two pictures. The task could be phrased as follows.

Look carefully at the two pictures in front of you. The pictures are similar in many ways, but notice that there are differences between them. Make a list of the ways in which the two pictures differ. Then write one sentence that describes how the pictures differ. For example, you could write, “While in the first picture the man is wearing a bowtie, in the second picture, he has a regular tie.”

Clearly the more complicated the pictures and the more small differences there are between the two pictures, the more demanding the task will be. If students are asked to do the task in groups, there may be some use of the mother tongue as students talk about the vocabulary they need or identify differences in the pictures. This is fine if it furthers students’ ability to complete the task. However, it is essential that when students report on their findings to the whole class, they use only English.

The next stage is the reporting stage. Here students need to share their findings with the rest of the class in English. In this case, students might be asked to write two sentences on the board that describe two differences in the pictures. You could encourage them to write about differences that are very minor which other students may not have noticed. Once all the students have done this (hopefully all at the same time so that students are not waiting for one group to write a sentence on the board), students can be asked to read all of the sentences on the board and find items that only one group identified. This then requires all of the students to read all the sentences on the board and to identify unique and accurate answers. Notice that at this stage the students are focused on meaning, that is, they are focused on identifying the differences in the pictures.

The final stage involves a focus on form. In this stage, the teacher might ask the class to read the sentences again and note any sentences that they think need to be revised. These revisions might be due to grammatical errors or to using an inappropriate vocabulary item. It is only at this stage that the focus shifts to form and the development of grammatical and lexical accuracy. There is then a place in task-based teaching to develop accuracy, but it occurs only after the students have focused on a meaningful task.

In order to successfully complete a task-based activity, teachers need to do the following. First, they need to select tasks that they believe will be engaging for the students. Second, they need to prepare the students for the language they will need in completing the task. Third, they need to provide clear directions regarding what students are to do and give them adequate time to do this, allowing them to use their mother tongue when necessary. Fourth, they need to have some way of making students accountable for the completion of the task by having students write or tell about their

findings in English. Finally, teachers need to focus on the language used in the task as a way of developing the students' proficiency in English. Doing tasks in this manner makes it possible to have classroom activities that provide a focus both on meaning and on form.

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