

The various tasks and exercises that students do, based on material in their coursebook, are the students' main interaction with the language in the classroom. Many teachers often find it difficult to select or decide how to adapt activities for their own classes. In this article, I want to

What is a good task?

Andrew Littlejohn compares tasks that cast the teacher in the role of 'language policeman' with those that have a wider educational value and produce a 'unique classroom'.

describe some of the ways I use as a teacher and materials writer to identify and choose the most effective task.

I use the word 'task' here to refer to any language learning activity that the students do in their classes, whether it is a language game, a drill, comprehension questions, a gap-fill exercise, a simulation, or a project.

The importance of 'tasks'

In most English language classes, the amount of time that teachers and students spend communicating *directly* with each other is usually quite low. Often, this is limited to 'management' language (e.g. 'Have you got your book?') or brief exchanges about the teacher's or student's personal life ('Are you feeling better today?').

Most of what teachers and students say to each other is shaped by the tasks that they are doing. We can say then, that tasks are an 'interface' between teachers and students; it is *through* a task that they communicate with each other. To take an example, imagine that a teacher sets the following task for the class:

'Read the text on page 64. Don't worry about difficult words, just read it all the way through without stopping.'

If, when the class begins reading, one student keeps asking the meaning of vocabulary items, the teacher will consider those questions inappropriate at that moment. Rather than reply to the student's questions, the teacher might say, 'Don't worry about that now. Just read it. We can look at individual words later'.

Clearly, tasks are important in determining *what* students are permitted to say, and in shaping *who* teachers and students can be in the classroom. This means that it is very important to look closely at what tasks require teachers and students to perform. In order to do this, we can compare two very different types of tasks. The first type of task is, I am sure, a familiar one. The second type, perhaps less so.

Two types of task

TASK 1: A trip to the museum

For this first type of task, imagine that the students have just been learning about Present Simple question forms. The teacher now divides the students into pairs. One student in each pair is A and the other B. Each student is then given a role card, shown in Figure 1.

Student A
 You want to go to the museum.
 You want to know the following:

- what time the museum opens
- what time it closes
- how much a ticket costs
- if there is a restaurant

You ring the museum to find out.

Student B
 You work at the museum.
 Here is some information.

CITY MUSEUM
 Admission: £2.00; children free
 Open: 10.30 - 5.30 Mon - Sat
 10.30 - 12.30 Sunday
 The restaurant closes 30 minutes later.

Figure 1: Two role cards for 'A trip to the museum'

What is a good task?



Does it look familiar? In the modern day 'communicative' classroom, this is probably one of the most common types of task: 'the information gap'. Students begin working in pairs, asking and answering questions guided by their role cards. On completion, they exchange roles and begin again. Through the task, the students get plenty of practice with question forms and in answering questions. To this extent, the task is very successful. But is it completely satisfying? Before we discuss this question, let's look at a very different type of task.

Tasks are an 'interface' between teachers and students

TASK 2: A question poster
Imagine that the class of secondary-school-aged learners has just been working through a unit in their coursebook on the theme of animals. They have learned the names of some animals, talked briefly about what animals they can see in the pictures and then listened to some sounds on the cassette, guessing which animal makes that sound.

The teacher then sticks a large piece of paper on the wall, draws a large circle on it, writes 'Animals' in the centre, and adds a question on a line from the circle, 'What do whales eat?' The teacher then says to the class:

'Look at the pictures in your book. What questions do you have about the animals? What would you like to know about them?'

Students then begin suggesting questions. Initially, many of these come in their mother tongue, but as the teacher writes them up in English, the students start suggesting their own questions in English. The teacher points to the use of 'do' and 'can' and question words in the questions on the board, and encourages the students to form their own questions in a similar way. Figure 2 shows an example. When quite a few questions are on the board, students copy them into their files and the teacher says:

'During the next few weeks, we will be doing a lot of work about animals. Look at these questions. I want you to try to find the answers. Ask your friends, look in books, ask your parents, ask your other teachers. See what you can find out. At the end of every lesson we can spend five or ten minutes to see what answers you have found.'

Over the next few lessons, the teacher asks the students what answers they have. Individual students write these answers in simple English on a piece of paper, and stick them next to the question on the question poster.

Different roles for teachers and learners

As you can see, the tasks are very different. How would you answer these questions about each task?

- What is the aim of the task?
- Where do the ideas and language come from?
- How personally involving is the task?
- What happens to what the students produce?

You might like to think about your answers before you read my own.

TASK 1: A visit to the museum

There is no doubt that information gap tasks such as the 'museum' example are very useful. They provide good opportunities for language work and allow students to progress at their own pace. They do have some important limitations. The aim of the task is purely a language one: to provide practice in question forms. Once the students are already fairly proficient in using question forms, *the task will have little or no value.*

involvement is quite low. If you were to do the task with different classes, even in different countries, the result would be almost identical in each case. We can say then, that the task produces a 'standardised classroom'.

TASK 2: A question poster

If we think about the question poster task in terms of the same four questions, we get a very different set of answers. We can see immediately that

can say that the teacher's role is mainly what I call 'the language policeman', checking that the students are producing language correctly. In the question poster task however, the teacher's role is one of supporting the


The aim of the task goes beyond language learning

students, helping them to say what they want to say. This means then, that every time a class does the task, the outcome will be different: the task produces a 'unique classroom', shaped by the unique individuals who are in it.

By comparing these two tasks, we can see some key elements that we can use to judge how much 'value' a task has. When I look at tasks then, I ask myself the following questions:

- Does the task have value *beyond* language learning?
- Are students *personally* involved?
- Is the student's personal contribution significant?
- Will the task produce 'a unique classroom'?

If the answer to most, or all, of these questions is 'Yes', then I know that I have a task that is often preferable to another task that practises the same language point.

Does this mean that tasks such as 'A trip to the museum' have no value? Not at all, because with a little bit of imagination, it is possible to make simple changes to 'standardised' tasks that will turn them into 'unique' tasks. In a future article, I want to show you how I think we can do this. It will give you many more practical examples of tasks which provide language practice and incorporate wider educational values. 



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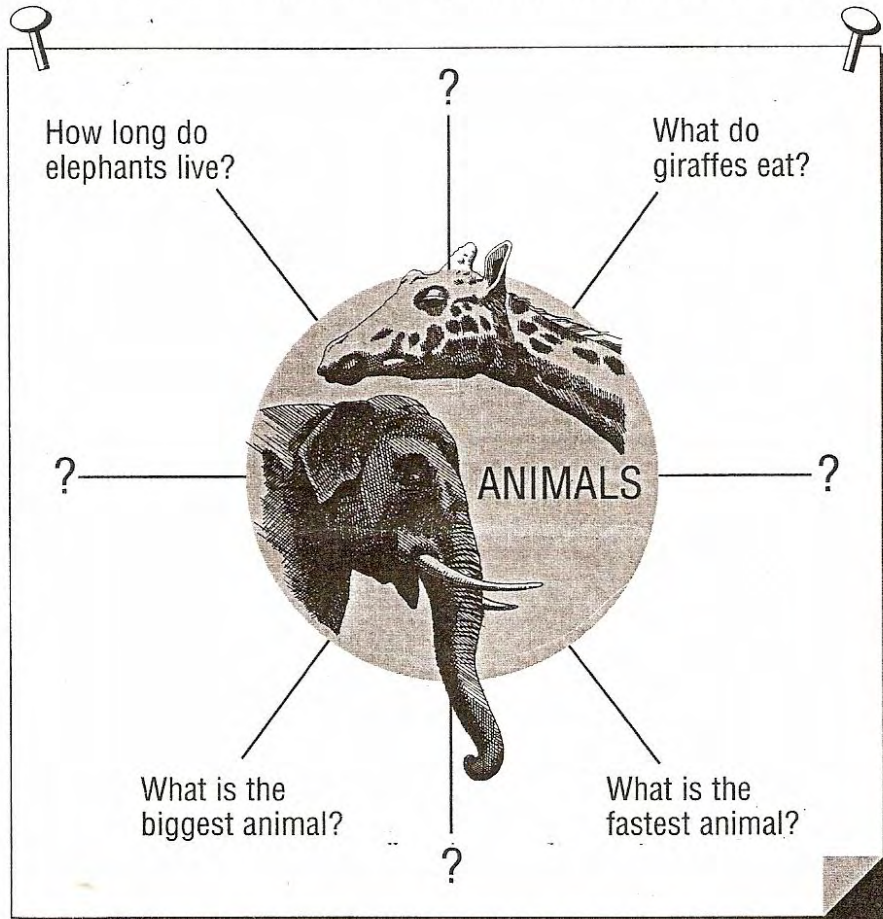


Fig 2: A question poster (from *Cambridge English for Schools*, Teacher's Book 1, page 51)

The task is also quite tightly structured and all of the ideas in it are provided by the role cards. The language too, mainly comes directly from the role cards; students simply have to apply the grammatical rule they have been learning in order to construct questions around it. Once the task is over, the precise details of it can be forgotten; its sole purpose is to practise question forms. It would be very unlikely, for example, that the teacher would begin the next lesson with the question, 'What time does the museum open?' The level of prolonged personal

the aim of the task goes beyond language learning. While the students get exposure to and practice in using question forms (as in Task 1) they are also developing wider *educational* abilities: drawing on their own knowledge, formulating genuine questions, and researching. The task therefore will continue to have value even when students become proficient in question forms. They are more personally involved in what is going on; the questions all come from them.

This places the teacher in a different role. In the 'museum task', we