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## How to Develop Tasks for Vocabulary Acquisition

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### **Abstract:**

*Task-based language teaching approach is considered an effective approach in education practice. In task-based classroom, the chief focus is the performance of tasks. Accordingly, teaching vocabulary is not just introducing a collection of lexical items to students any more but guiding learners to acquire vocabulary's features in the process of performing tasks. By analyzing the theoretical basis and features of Task-based Approach, the author puts forward principles in designing tasks for vocabulary acquisition and suggests some sample tasks applicable to pre-task, in-task and post-task stages of a lesson.*

**Keywords:** Task-based language teaching approach, tasks, vocabulary acquisition

### 1. Introduction

Vocabulary is an essential element of any language, thus the meanings of new words are often emphasized and vocabulary teaching is central to language teaching. However, teaching vocabulary may be problematic because many teachers just end up with showing their students a list of new words or phrases and stating the meanings of each. As a consequence, learners face problems to communicate when they do not know a specific word for a particular context or very often, they find themselves talking around vocabulary that they cannot recall quickly enough. The point here is the lack of context in vocabulary teaching, so vocabulary acquired is just passive vocabulary which we can understand when other people use it but cannot recall and use appropriately. Therefore, teachers should focus their practice on providing appropriate activities for students to develop their receptive knowledge through reading and listening, and productive knowledge through writing and speaking. Additionally, teachers should be aware of the fact that knowing a word involves not only its most frequent meaning, but also all its features. So, teaching vocabulary more effectively requires the teacher to consider the word frequency, the context in which it may be found, and the features or aspects related to knowing a word. The teacher also needs to think in advance about the interaction among students to make acquisition to happen, the amount and quality of learners' involvement, the receptive and productive knowledge involved. In other words, the teacher needs to design appropriate context-based tasks which help learners to acquire and improve active vocabulary naturally.

In this research, we stay focused on how to develop tasks for vocabulary acquisition through three main parts. As a way of start, the first part covers a literature review of task-based language teaching and vocabulary teaching; the second part is about principles in designing tasks for new vocabulary acquisition; and the last part is devoted to the presentation of options targeting unfamiliar vocabulary required to perform a task.

### 2. Literature Review

#### 2.1. Overview of Task-based Language Teaching

##### 2.1.1. Task

Since 1980s, many linguists have attempted to define the term 'task' as it is the core of task-based language teaching (TBLT). Nunan (1989) considers a task as 'a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is primarily focused on meaning rather than form' (p. 10). Accordingly, learners should use their existing knowledge in order to achieve their goals. In the case that the task requires new information, the teacher will take a role as the provider so that the process is not interrupted and the expected outcome could be gained. For Willis (1996), a task is '[an activity] where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome' (p. 23). It is more effective to use a meaning-based approach than a form-based approach and students are encouraged to express their thoughts even if some of the language is inaccurate. The end product or the learning outcome may be linguistic, for example, an answer to a question, or non-linguistic, for instance, asking for directions to get to a particular place. In addition, Ellis (2003) indicates five task features. First, a task is an activity in teaching and learning a language. This type of activity requires learners to use the target language to achieve a particular purpose. Second, a task focuses on meaningful activities or on the language form. Third, a task involves language use in terms of communication, to allow learners opportunities to take part in

meaningful interactions to complete a specific assignment. Fourth, a task uses one or more language skills. Fifth, a task involves learners in understanding the use of the target language.

In general, task in TBLT is defined as an activity or a piece of work in which meaning is primary. Assessment is ultimately based on task outcome (in other words, the appropriate completion of real world tasks) rather than on accuracy of prescribed language forms.

### 2.1.2. Task-Based Language Teaching

Task-based approach in second language teaching was first performed by Prabhu, who published the Bangalore research report in 1982 and advanced the concept of task-based approach. As one of the three most important methodologies (together with Competency-Based Language Teaching and Content-Based Language Teaching) which have been derived from Communicative Language Teaching, TBLT offers learners opportunities to actively engage in communication in order to achieve a goal or complete a task. TBLT seeks to develop students' inter-language through providing a task and then using language to solve it. The advocates believe that learners may learn more effectively when their minds are focused on the task, rather on the language they are using. Therefore, TBLT is a learner-centered approach. It lies on the teacher to produce and supply different tasks which will give learners the opportunity to experiment spontaneously, individually and originally with the target language. Another role of the teacher in TBLT is that he or she has to take the responsibility of the consciousness raising process, helping learners to 'correct, clarify and deepen' their perceptions of the foreign language. (Michael Lewis 15). All in all, TBLT is an approach which promotes learning by doing.

### 2.1.3. The Structural Framework of TBLT

There have been many task-based TBLT models for class lessons. However, this study draws on Willis' (1996) framework. That is because we, in this paper, describe tasks as text-based tasks which Willis (1996) put a consideration on. The text-based lessons designed for the experiment include pre-task, in-task, and post-task steps. Correspondingly, there are 3 stages to the framework that Willis (1996) suggests: pre-task; task cycle and language focus.

Pre-task		
<b>Introduction to topic and tasks</b>		
Teacher explores the topic with the class, highlights useful words and phrases. Learners may be exposed to examples.		
Task cycle		
<b>Task</b>	<b>Planning</b>	<b>Report</b>
Students do the task in pairs or small groups. Teacher monitors; mistakes do not matter.	Students prepare to report. Accuracy is important, so the teacher stands by and gives advice.	Students exchange or present report. Teacher listens and then comments.
Language focus		
<b>Analysis</b>		<b>Practice</b>
Students examine then discuss.		Teacher conducts practice of new words.

*Table 1: Task-Based Lesson Plan Model (Willis, 1996, P.38)*

## *2.2. Task-Based Instruction in Teaching Vocabulary*

### 2.2.1. Vocabulary Teaching

Teaching words is a crucial aspect in learning a language as languages are based on words (Thornbury, 2002). However, teaching vocabulary is one of the most discussed parts of teaching English as a foreign language. Some authors state that vocabulary instruction was traditionally undervalued and teachers gave little attention to techniques to help students learn vocabulary as well. According to Carter & McCarthy (1988), in the past, vocabulary was considered a 'neglected aspect' in the process of language instruction. Allen (1983) argues that for many years, vocabulary instruction was not given the recognition and attention that it deserves in the foreign language classroom. She suggests that in methodology courses, so little was said about how to teach words and their meanings. Nowadays, vocabulary instruction is seen as a meaningful tool to be instructed and learnt in meaningful contexts (Scrivener, 1994). Despite the neglected aspect of vocabulary instruction in the past, its instruction and learning have been given much attention in the classroom in the last two decades (Douglas, 2000). Still, according to Douglas (2000), instead of giving students long lists of words without any context as teachers used to do in the past, some teachers are more and more concerned about effective ways to transmit knowledge of vocabulary to students.

It is commonly agreed that there are two main strategies to vocabulary learning and teaching – implicit and explicit (Dakun, 2000). Implicit vocabulary learning comes from encountering the words in context, not from focused instruction based on working with specific words. This indirect vocabulary learning can be improved by teaching the skills that students need in order to draw their own conclusions about vocabulary, discover word meanings through root analysis, and develop context skills. Explicit vocabulary instruction is based on the teacher clearly laying out the goals for the student and directly teaching the meanings of words through a close examination of specifically targeted words.

Language teachers are expected to know how to incorporate these implicit and explicit vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) into their lessons.

### 2.2.2. Tasks for Vocabulary Acquisition

From what we have presented in (I), we can summarize that for working with tasks we need to design materials or activities that focus on meaning by incorporating a gap for students to close. This gap creates a need and a motivation for students to find the information in order to complete the task. The task can be considered *unfocused* when it is not aimed to address a particular form, or *focused* when it is targeting a specific form (Ellis, 2003). Since the tasks we are discussing are meant to help learners to acquire vocabulary, they should be *focused* tasks. According to Johnson (in Ellis, 2003), 'focused tasks are of value to teachers because they provide a means of teaching specific linguistic features communicatively' (p.142). The tasks may require learners to get involved in either a real-world or artificial activity, but the language outcomes of the tasks must refer to real-world communication interaction. In order to implement the tasks, learners are also supposed to evaluate information and take many opportunities for negotiation of meaning. This negotiation of meaning helps learners to: 1) obtain comprehensible input by splitting the input in smaller pieces that can be more easily processed; 2) obtain feedback on their production; and 3) manipulate and correct their output (Ellis, 2003). So, the tasks should have all necessary features for target vocabulary to be acquired and used both in the class or real-world environments. In short, the main advantage of using this approach is that 'it enables learners to develop strategies for managing new vocabulary while also maintaining a communicative focus' (Newton (2001), p.30).

## **3. Principles in Designing Tasks for Vocabulary Acquisition**

### *3.1. Appeal*

Tasks should appeal to students' ultimate goals and interest, and motivate them to engage in language use. According to Skehan (1998), if information is of appropriate interest, more natural discourse is produced. Similarly, if tasks are based on topics that are relevant to learners' life, the outcome of acquisition will be much better. On the contrary, meaningless activities such as repetition of certain forms, most question and answer activities often lead to learners' inattention, low interest, and in the end, less learning.

### *3.2. Balance between Form and Meaning*

In TBLT, meaning is primary and there is an ultimate focus on contexts, communication and purposes. Therefore, learners have a feeling that they are using the real language and can go beyond the forms of language alone. However, form factor should not be neglected. According to Skehan, structured information seems to lead to greater accuracy and fluency whereas meaning centered tasks produce greater complexity especially when linked to planning. Thus, form and meaning in communicative task should be balanced so that neither dominates the other.

### *3.3. Moderate Difficulty*

It is widely proven in language teaching scenarios that tasks which are too demanding or too easy for learners will surely lead to failure because learners will lose their interest and attention very soon. Thus, tasks should be relatively challenging and reachable steps in learners' learning process. Those tasks of moderate difficulty can ensure both fluency and accuracy which are inseparable in language learning.

### *3.4. Exposure to Worthwhile and Authentic Language*

Another way of boosting students' motivation is using authentic, practical and real world tasks. That definitely connects classroom activities with real communicative environment and makes learners feel that they are doing something meaningful. Learners should be encouraged to express their own meaning as early as possible after productive skills have been introduced, and the tasks designed should promote learning by doing.

### *3.5. Collaboration*

The role of collaboration should be emphasized in performing tasks at class because it happens in reality. It means the teacher should exploit the potential advantages of group work or pair work. However, it is not enough to simply put students in groups or pairs to complete a task. What counts is the quality of interaction that the task brings about, how it enables students to engage effectively in performing the task and how it motivates students to support each other's language learning.

## **4. Suggested Tasks for Vocabulary Acquisition**

In this section, we are making efforts to present some suggested '*focused*' options in the pre-task, in-task, or post-task stages of a lesson. To make the options more understandable, we illustrate them by tasks created to teach Unit 3 (Pre-intermediate Market Leader Book) and the task we are aiming to is the Reading task (Pre-Intermediate Market Leader Book, p26).

For your information, there are two groups of words/phrases in the Vocabulary section (just before Reading section) that we will target in pre-task stage:

- Group A: supplier, manufacturer, wholesaler, retailer, refund, return, delivery, discount, dispatch, purchase, exchange, storage, distributor, warehouse and bargain;

- Group B: cooling-off period, credit-card details, method of payment, interest-free credit, out of stock, money-back guarantee, after-sales service and loyal-card scheme.

In in-task stage, we guide students to attend to unfamiliar vocabulary they come across when they are doing their reading. Finally, in post-task stage, students are supposed to reflect and review their newly learnt vocabulary.

Our suggestions are adapted from Newton's (2011) work; however, we replace some teacher-led and individual tasks with more communicative and collaborative ones.

Options for Targeting Unfamiliar Vocabulary in Communication Tasks		
Pre-task options	1.	Predicting
	2.	Cooperative dictionary search
	3.	Words and definitions
In-task options	4.	Interactive glossary
	5.	Negotiation
Post-task options	6.	Information transfer
	7.	Reflection

Table 2: Options for Targeting Unfamiliar Vocabulary in Communication Tasks (Adapted From Newton, 2001, P.31)

#### 4.1. Pre-Task Options

The advantage of presenting the vocabulary in this stage is that the teacher is giving the learners 'the first chance to meet new words' (Newton,2001) and students will have sort of some input and be able to perform better in the following stages of the lesson.

##### 4.1.1. Option 1 – Predicting: Word Web

- Step 1: In this task, students form teams of four or five. They are given a word web to add words related to specific sub-topics of the lesson topic: Sales (see the word webs below). Each student works individually with a web for some minutes. Then, they share their web with the rest of the teammates and help each other to have the words required in the webs. This word web helps students to organize words according to semantic categories (Newton, 2001) and the possibility to add more words as they move along in the lesson.

For example, the word web given below is created to deal with Group A in Vocabulary section (Pre-intermediate Market Leader Book). It is worth mentioning that not all of the words are unfamiliar to students and some words may be new to a student but familiar to another. Therefore, collaborative tasks seem to be ideal options.

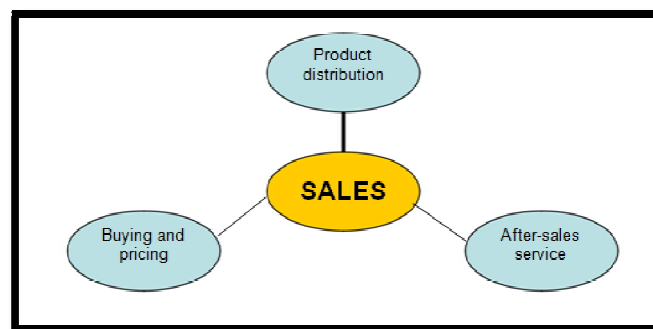


Figure 1: Word Web

- Stage 2: After prediction task, students are asked to share their outcome web with other teams in order to give and receive feedback and have their word web as complete as possible. Then, one group is asked to give their answers and the rest of the class can provide corrections or suggestions. Students are required to share all their outcomes to complete one in common. This task is form oriented in the aspect that students pay attention to spelling so they can write the words to complete the web. Since the web refers to words related, students can see the relationship among the words and have a general classification of new vocabulary. Therefore, they can acquire a word in relation with other ones.

##### 4.1.2. Option 2 - Cooperative Dictionary Search: Jigsaw

According to Wikipedia, the jigsaw technique is a method of organizing classroom activity that makes students dependent on each other to succeed. It breaks classes into groups and breaks assignments into pieces that the group assembles to complete the (jigsaw) puzzle. The main purpose of this task is to have all students communicating and exchanging information (Willis & Willis, 2007). When applying this task, we assign each group to take charge of one word/phrase. They have to look up the meaning in the dictionary and provide a simpler description of the word that can provide the other students with more details and impression about the word/phrase. The task mainly focuses on meaning but the teacher can require students to provide word form, word family or collocation if necessary. Students are encouraged to be very creative when giving the description. They can describe the word by showing the real object,

explaining its meaning, illustrating it by a drawing, mimicking it or putting it in a sentence or a story. The goal is every student can complete the table below by collecting all the information from all groups.

Phrase	Description	Phrase	Description
Cooling-off period		Out of stock	
		Money-back guarantee	
Credit-card details			
Method of payment		After-sales service	
Interest-free credit		Loyalty-card scheme	

Table 3: Jigsaw (Used For Group B, Pre-Intermediate Market Leader Book)

#### 4.1.3. Option 3 – Words and Definitions: Matching

Matching is a very common activity in language teaching. Textbooks usually use matching, together with listing and ordering activities at the beginnings of units, to introduce or revise useful words and phrases to prepare for the main topics. The outcomes are usually clear (e.g. a completed list, a set of matched information). But although they give valuable exposure to relevant topic-based language, they rarely stimulate much learner interaction. With some preparation, the teacher can make a matching task more collaborative and effective by using cards. In this task, students get into groups and each is given 2 sets of cards, one of word cards and the other of description/meaning cards. To make the task more challenging, the teacher can add one or two extra words cards. Students are supposed to work together to match the words and their definitions as quickly as possible. The advantage of this task is that students have to do something with the word before using it. From our observation, students seem much more interested and involved in this kind of matching in comparison with the ones that they do in textbooks. Luckily, nowadays, with the help of technology, it does not take the teacher much time and work to prepare for the task. There are so many flashcard making applications or websites which allows you to create cards for such activities very quickly. What you have to do is typing words and their meanings in corresponding boxes and then you will have flashcards to print out in a second. We highly recommend <https://www.vocabtest.com> for its convenience not only in making flashcards but also in creating other vocabulary tasks such as crossword puzzles, gap-filling exercises, word search puzzles, moving memory games and spelling practice...

#### 4.2. In-Task Options

From the point of view of task-based instruction, learning is most effective when learners attend to the form of the language when they are really involved in communicative engagements. That is why nowadays, in-task vocabulary acquisition is put more emphasis on.

##### 4.2.1. Option 4 – Interactive Glossary: Information Gap

For an interactive glossary, like Option 3, the teacher can use flashcards of unfamiliar word students may come across in the task. Each flashcard has the word on one side and the definition on the other side. Students work in groups of four or five. The flashcards are divided among the group members and laid face down beside them. During a task, for example reading task (Pre-Intermediate Market Leader Book, p.25), whenever a student requests help with a particular word, the interactive glossary can go as follows:

- Step 1: Those who know the word share their understanding with the others. If no one in the group knows the word, group members together try to guess what it means from context.
- Step 2: The learner who has the word flashcard reads the definition to the group
- Step 3: The group makes further discussion to make sure everyone understand the word if necessary.

This option brings about many advantages. The effort, attention and collaboration motivated by real communicative demands result in better retention. However, at the outset, the teacher needs to keep a close watch on the group work in order to prevent them from skipping a step or spending too much time on it and diverting the attention from the main goals of the task.

##### 4.2.2. Option 5 – Negotiation

Negotiation is the most challenging option in the list. It requires students to negotiate the meaning of new words or phrases they run across during the task without any external assistance. With this option, the teacher encourages students to go beyond class environment and really use their English to overcome unknown vocabulary in order to get the task done.

With negotiation option, students are assigned to work in groups or pairs on a reading task for instance. To deal with an unfamiliar word, they need to collaborate with their partner to figure out the meanings by sharing their existing knowledge about the word or drawing on context cues to come up with a guess. In other words, they have to use each other as a resource rather than relying on flashcards, dictionaries or the teacher's help. So it is easy realizing that learners who can do such negotiation need to have enough English competence to make themselves relatively understandable. The negotiation between students can go like this when they read the article in Unit 3 (Pre-Intermediate Market Leader Book, p.25)

S1: Do you know what 'closing a deal' means?

S2: Well, I'm not sure but 'closing' here, I think is ending something and 'deal' in business context is a negotiation.

S1: Yeah. And the sentence is '...women are better at actually closing a deal', so 'closing a deal' must be positive. So maybe, 'closing a deal' can be ending a negotiation with an agreement.

S2: I agree

.....

S2: Incentive, in the last paragraph... What is it?

S1: I know this word. It means something motivating which makes you try to work better.

S2: Yes, it makes sense here. Thank you.

If negotiation can be done by students, that will definitely bring them many benefits not just in vocabulary acquisition but also for oral fluency. The thing here is that based on students' level, the teacher should encourage, guide and control students so that they gradually get used to negotiating at class.

#### 4.3. Post-Task Options

Post-task options can be any following-up activities to reinforce newly learnt vocabulary. They are opportunities for learners to get more exposure to the target words or phrases and consolidate what learners have known about them in terms of meaning, written form, spoken form and collocation...

##### 4.3.1. Option 6 – Information Transfer: Running Dictation

The teacher needs to prepare a page of two short texts or two set of individual sentences that incorporate the target vocabulary; print a copy in a large font for easy reading; and place it in the front of the class. It remains there throughout the activity (for larger classes, you may need 3-5 copies placed around the room.) Students work in pairs. One person is the designated writer and the other partner is the runner. When time starts, the runner from each group 'runs' to the front and memorizes as much text as possible. He or she then returns to the writer and reports what was read. The writer writes. This continues until one text or one set of sentences is complete and then, they change their role. After everyone finishes, the teacher passes out the copies of the texts/ sentences and student can check their work. A running dictation is usually very competitive and exciting, it gets students out of their seats and engages reading, writing, listening and speaking skills. Through it, the target vocabulary can be consolidated in terms of pronunciation, spelling, collocation and use.

In case you have to handle 40-50 students in a single classroom like we do in Vietnam, such running dictation task seems impossible to do. However, we can make a compromise with the following version. Instead of printing out the texts or sentences, the teacher can show it in a power point slide. Students work in pair, the writer sits with his or her back to the slide and is not allowed to turn back. Certainly, this version is less fun but still very competitive and effective.

The following dictation worksheet can be used to revise the target words of Sales (Pre-Intermediate Market Leader book, p.23)

**Dictation worksheet**

1. These companies **purchase** and hold inventory directly from **manufacturers**
2. These companies are also known as merchant **distributors**. They receive stock from the **manufacturer** or **wholesaler** and can fill orders, package and **dispatch** them on to your customers or **retailers**.
3. We offer a broad range of **warehouse storage** solutions
4. **Delivery** and **dispatch** should be at the **supplier's** expense.
5. Once we receive your package, we will promptly process an **exchange** or issue a **refund** in accordance with this policy.

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1. University Stores provides heated **storage** space in its secure **warehouse**.
2. The **supplier** must constantly monitor the quality of its **deliveries** and services.
3. Requests for **refund** or **exchange** of merchandise **purchased** by check must be accompanied by the original receipt.
4. If you ask around, you'll be directed to try a fulfillment company, a **wholesaler** or a **distributor**.
5. We are a **discount** and **bargain** store, selling name-brand items for great prices!

Figure 2: Worksheet 1: Dictation Worksheet

##### 4.3.2. Option 7: Reflection - Vocabulary Log

This option is not new but is a very effective way of recording and remembering the vocabulary learners have learned. The teacher can allow students to choose to keep their vocabulary log: in a notebook, in their computer or in their cell phone. The format of a vocabulary log can be diversified but there are usually three essential parts: the new word, the meaning and at least one example sentence.

The following is the format of vocabulary log suggested by Newton (2001)

<b>Vocabulary log</b>	
Look back over the words you met for the first time in this task. Decide on five that you think will be useful for you. Then complete the table	
<b>New words</b>	<b>example sentence, collocation, definition</b>
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	
Show your words to another learner, and explain your plan for revising these words.	
Notes	

*Table 4: Vocabulary Log (Newton, 2001, P.36)*

Vocabulary log provides learners with a good way of reflecting and taking responsibility for their learning. It is also the assistance of reinforcing their retention.

## 5. Conclusion

In task-based instruction, knowing a word is not anymore knowing only its translation, but knowing its form, meaning and use in a specific context and with a particular purpose. The tasks for vocabulary acquisition, therefore, need to afford interest and authenticity, be able to improve language by much negotiation of meanings, and create a climate of cooperation. The activities presented in this paper hopefully will come to be a valuable reference for teachers who want to adopt TBLT as their teaching approach.

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