

# DEVELOPING LANGUAGE LEARNING TASKS FOR BEGINNERS

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This article, *Developing Language Learning Tasks for Beginners*, is the third of the three articles published in this bulletin discussing task-based instruction. The first article discusses current principles of English language teaching and learning and the second briefly shows how Task-Based Language Instruction, a language teaching and learning approach compatible with the Communicative Language Teaching, creates learning conditions required for effective second language acquisition. This article presents examples of task, in particular for beginners, including students of year VII semester I. Points to be borne in mind in task development will be first considered, then samples of tasks presented, and finally how tasks can be organized into a lesson unit discussed.

## A. Points to be Borne in Mind in Developing Tasks for Beginners

Looking at the teaching and learning context in the Indonesian junior high school, a number of key points should be borne in mind in developing tasks for the students. First, English instruction must implement the school-based syllabus prepared by the school with reference to the standard of content and standard of graduate's competency set up by the ministry of education. Tasks should be derived from the syllabus prepared by the school; tasks are to promote the learning of pre-specified competencies and/or basic competencies and linguistic items. Therefore, the weak version of task-based language instruction is adopted. Second, the major aim of English instruction is to enable the learners to understand and express ideas in simple sentences or utterances and discourses in the four language skills and thus tasks should be designed to develop these skills. Third, the learners are teenagers with no or little prior knowledge or proficiency in English and they are used to teacher-controlled classes. For that reason, tasks requiring the learners to process the language or produce one word or short (simple) expressions are likely to be suitable for the beginners. It is desirable that the tasks gradually develop the learners' independence. Fourth, classes are large with 36 to 40 students sitting on unmovable benches. This means that tasks should not require significant rearrangements of seats. Having the learners work in pairs or small groups with the classmates sitting next to them might be the most efficient. Next, teaching resources are limited to the course book (normally one) and simple teaching aids available in the classroom, i.e. blackboard, chalk, the pupils' stationery items, and in many cases an audio tape player.

In addition, the following principles are relevant in implementing task-based language instruction in the Indonesian junior high school context (see Willis, 1996).

- 1) The target language needs to be used as much as possible in the classroom, starting from words and phrases the learners know.
- 2) Tasks are developed from what the learners already know and can perform.
- 3) A friendly classroom atmosphere needs to be encouraged so that the learners feel secure to make contributions to the class and ask for help from the teacher when necessary.
- 4) Tasks are developed to build the learners' confidence and ability.
- 5) Tasks do not require the children to contribute much in the initial stage.
- 6) The teacher does not over-correct the students or expect perfect language production from the learners.
- 7) Mother tongue use is allowed but at the same time target language use is encouraged.

The following section presents examples of tasks that meet various language teaching and learning principles compatible with the SLA theories, the learning context, and the seven points above.

## **B. Sample of Tasks for Beginners**

According to the learners' cognitive and performance demands, tasks can be classified into three categories: processing, producing and interacting tasks (Nunan, 1985; 1985; 1999). Tasks suitable for beginners, however, are possibly processing and production tasks. It should be noted, though, that some of the language production task samples involve 'interactions'. However, since the interactions are not 'genuine' (the learners just read their prepared single words or sentences), the tasks are not considered interaction tasks; they are regarded as language production tasks. A task sometimes not only involves one kind of cognitive demand, but two or three together. For instance, a processing task may involve a production activity, and may be followed by having the learners 'interact'.

### **1. Language processing tasks**

*Drawing objects, listening, word puzzle, reading, and addition/subtraction* are examples of language processing tasks. Below is an example of a drawing task. This task can be used in the first meeting. This task is developed in order to raise the children's motivation to learn English, and to make them realise that to some degree, whether they are aware or not, they already

know some English. In fact this task is made up of English words that are very similar to or the same as Indonesian words.

*Task: Drawing objects*  
(20 minutes)

a. Pre-task:

Listen to the teacher showing you that you already know some English words or expressions such as: *hotel, tennis, and badminton*.

b. Task:

In pairs, study the following words. You must know the Indonesians of some or all of the words. Can you draw them?

television

radio

camera

taxi

bus

ice cream

c. Post-task:

1. Listen to the teacher explaining the Indonesian equivalents for the words.
2. Mention and/or list other words or expressions that you already know. The teacher will list the words/expressions on the board and discuss the meanings of the words or expressions.

## 2. Language production tasks

Language production tasks suitable for beginners are tasks such as *labeling pictures*, *listing*, *expressing (simple) thoughts*, and *completion*. The tasks can be written and/or spoken. Below is an example of such tasks. This task is for reinforcing the learning of stationery items and animals and promoting focus on form, i.e. singular and plural forms.

*Task: Labeling pictures*


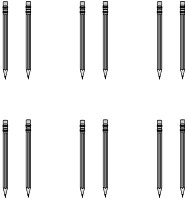
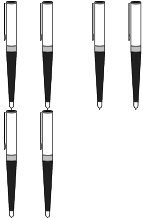


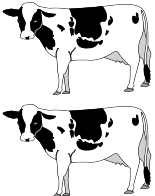

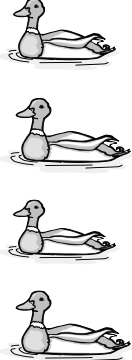
(15 minutes)

a. Pre-task:

1. Follow your teacher's explanation on singular and plural nouns.
2. Listen to your teacher explaining how to express plural nouns.
3. Follow your teacher demonstrating doing this task.

b. Task:

Label the following pictures.

			
.....	.....	.....	.....
			
.....	.....	.....	.....

c. Post-task:

1. Correct your answers together.
2. Voluntarily, reports your answers to the class.
3. Listen to your teacher's comments on your pronunciation.

As stated earlier, some of the language production task types involve 'interactions' where learners are engaged in short exchanges involving prepared one-word, phrase, or short sentence expressions. Such tasks require the learners to produce words, phrases or sentences in writing in the target language then use the prepared words, phrases and sentences to 'interact'. To reduce the level of difficulty of the tasks and to lower the learners' anxiety, the learners are allowed to read their prepared sentences, phrases or words while performing the interactions. The following is an example of a production task that involves an interaction.

*Task: Expressing thoughts (telling possessions)*  
(20 minutes)

a. Pre-task:

1. You are about to tell your friends the toys you have.
2. Listen to your teacher explaining the *Subject + Verb + Object* construction (such as *I have a robot*) to express possessions.
3. Follow the teacher demonstrating how to do the task.

b. Task:

Tell 5 toys that you have to a friend sitting next to you. First, write your sentences below. For example, you write *I have a robot*. If you do not know the English, ask your teacher. After that, in pairs tell your toys to each other by reading your sentences.

1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	

c. Post-task:

Voluntarily, tell the class the toys you have. Let the teacher list them on the board. Your teacher will lead you to pronounce the words together.

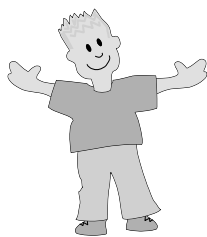
In terms of purpose, tasks can be classified into two: tasks for introducing new language and tasks for reinforcing earlier learned language. A task for introducing new language sometimes has a lengthy pre-task stage activity. At the pre-task stage, the learners may need to be exposed to sufficient target language or given language support. The following example of a task has a lengthy pre-task activity.

*Task: Expressing thoughts (telling possessions)*  
(25 minutes)

a. Pre-task:

Repeat after the teacher reading the following text about Rudi's pets aloud and follow your teacher's explanation on the Indonesians of the new words.

Read aloud the following text about Rudi's animals.



Hi, I am Rudi. It's good to see you again.

I like animals. I have animals. I have a rabbit, a cat, and a chicken. Look at my rabbit, cat, and chicken.



This is my rabbit.



This is my cat.



This is my chicken.

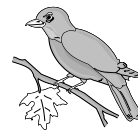
I also have a dog, a duck, and a bird. I like my dog, duck, and bird. Look at my dog, duck, and bird.



This is my dog.



This is my duck.



This is my bird.

I also like butterflies, cows, and snakes.



This is a butterfly.



This is a cow.



This is a snake.

**b. Task:**

Write all the animals that Rudi keeps in complete sentences in the left column. Then, write the animals you keep in the right column. If you do not know their English, ask your teacher. After that, tell your partner the animals you keep. You may read your sentences. See the example.

**Example:**

1      *Rudi has a rabbit.*

1      *I have a cat.*

Write your sentences in the following column.			
1.		1.	
2.		2.	
3.		3.	
4.		4.	
5.		5.	
<p>c. Post-task:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Tell the class the animals you keep.</li> <li>2. Listen to the teacher giving you grammar and pronunciation feedback.</li> </ol>			

### C. Developing a Lesson Unit

A lesson normally has a number of tasks. For example, a lesson of 80 minutes such as that in the Indonesian junior high school context can have three to four classroom tasks and two or three take-home tasks. Classroom tasks refer to tasks completed at school and take-home tasks to those done at home as homework. The three or four classroom tasks may consist of one revision task and two or three lesson proper tasks. A revision task is a task that is specifically employed for reviewing or reinforcing the learning of language or skills presented in the last lesson. It does not mean, however, that a revision task cannot involve language learned in the earlier lessons. What is emphasised here is that the task is mainly developed to encourage the reinforcement of the learning of language or skills dealt with in the last lesson. Lesson proper tasks refer to tasks that are performed in order to learn the new language that is focused in a lesson. Like revision tasks, lesson proper tasks can also involve materials learned earlier. In fact, in most cases tasks developed for later lessons re-present or are related to language or skills the pupils learned in earlier lessons. Finally, take-home tasks are those done at home in order to reinforce the learning of the language presented in a lesson. Take-home tasks are also in many cases incorporated with language and skills the pupils learned in the previous classes. Indeed, such a mechanism of involving language and skills learned earlier in later relevant tasks is one of the ways task-based language instruction can employ to create natural re-presentation of language and repetition or reinforcement of learning.



Tasks making up a lesson unit can be graded and sequenced using Nunan's (1985; 1989; 1999) categorisation of tasks according to the learner's cognitive and performance demands. Each normal lesson unit may involve six tasks, i.e. one revision task, two or three lesson-proper tasks, and two or three take-home tasks. The revision task is always presented and done first, at the beginning of every lesson regardless of its level of difficulty as this task is prepared particularly for reviewing the materials learned in the previous class. Lesson-proper tasks are presented after the revision. One of the lesson-proper tasks is to introduce and promote the learning of the new language for the first time, and the rest are for reinforcement purposes. When a lesson involves two lesson-proper tasks only, the task introducing the learner to the new language for the first time is done first right after the revision task and the other next. When a lesson has three lesson-proper tasks, the one introducing the new language is presented first, and the other two are graded. The less demanding one is presented second, and the more complex one last. The general rule for the task grading and integration is that language processing tasks are considered less demanding than language production tasks, and language production tasks are assumed to be less demanding than interaction tasks.

One of the take-home tasks of every lesson unit can be *read, cover, read, and check*. As this task is not only a task to complete but also served as a glossary, in spite of its simplicity, this task is always presented or done last. When a lesson unit has only two take-home tasks, the task other than the *read, cover, read, and check* is presented first and *read, cover, read, and check* second or last. When a lesson unit has three take-home tasks, the other two are graded. With the exception of the revision tasks, tasks introducing the new language for the first time, and *read, cover, write and check*, tasks are presented from the less demanding one to the more.

## References

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